"The Last Dream of an Angel"

by L.J Hannah

About 54,000 words.

I know a bullet may strike

the heart of the little bird this morning,

the bird that is celebrating life with all its might.

- Thich Nhat Hanh, *Structure of Suchness*.

PART I: TAL

Tal

Tal had declined to buy gap insurance for his car. His boss's daughter was attractive. What if he and his boss's daughter went out drinking and driving?

Well, what would happen is he would spin off the road driving too fast, would total his car, would get fired, would become broke, and his girlfriend would kick him out of the apartment. He would end up moving back in with his aunt. He would end up the next day at his aunt's house with his clothes and his computer and that would be all he had in the world.

#

Tal is a Jewish name, but Tal's mother did not know that. She just thought it sounded nice and, holding her newborn son, she thought, "Tal".

Tal's father, Ronald, was ambivalent toward the name of the child, though he had jokingly called the unborn baby "Scooter" many times during the pregnancy saying, for example,"Old Scooter's gonna be a baseball player, aren't you Scoot? Old Scooter's gonna play shortstop for the Rangers."

Or, after watching a news broadcast on the subject, Ronald got up from his easy chair, patted his wife's belly with a newspaper and said, "Ol' Scooty gonna win the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. Ain't ya Scoot?"

Tal was Ronald's second son and so Ronald was generally uninvested in the process of naming and guiding the new person. Besides that, during Tal's birth when the name was being finalized, Ronald had other things on his mind. He had placed a large bet on a baseball game between the state's two college teams. There was a lot of uncertainty. Ronald felt it was going to be a blowout since one of the teams was much, much better and would want to show off. But his best friend thought there would be a tight spread since it was a relatively friendly game, an exhibition match, and that the dominant team would go easy on the underdog.

Indeed, Ronald's palms were sweating while his wife was in labor. The game was being played at that very moment.

During Tal's childhood, in elementary school, he had shown himself as obviously bright and had been labeled "gifted" but by middle school, as the horizon of integrating into actual society began to appear, he had lost interest in applying himself. There were not any classes that preteen and teenage Tal liked, only ones that he tolerated. He tolerated chemistry and he tolerated mathematics, sort of, but everything else was an exercise in loathing. He especially loathed American History and that he had to take an American History class every year.

At age fourteen, in his only true attempt to wrest his own vision onto the real world that he would soon be forced to join, he wrote a letter to his history teacher, his chemistry teacher, the principal, the PTA, and his state legislator regarding the history curriculum in which he explained that he already knew "American History 1492-1945" like the back of his hand and that he felt he ought to learn more about, maybe, Indian History (that is, the history of India) or Chinese History since they were the biggest countries in the world. Foregoing that, which he knew was an absurd request, there

should at least be more European History. His ignorance of Europe had already been a point of personal embarassment. He told how he had got the internet and had joined an international online community where a good portion of those community members had been Dutch but he didn't know what Dutch actually meant, had never heard of The Netherlands or Holland, certainly did not know where they were and, as a result, he had been severely mocked. He explained too that he found it odd that he knew virtually nothing about Spain either until he looked it up out of personal curiosity and learned about Francisco Franco, a dictator. How and why did he know so much about Hitler but nothing about Franco? At the very, very least, he said, there should be a more thorough examination of recent history. He had been taking history classes every day for years but he had no idea how to understand current events. He mentioned the Gulf War, which supposedly had happened in the recent past, but what was it? What happened? It was an empty label that had no definition. Furthermore, what is Iraq? What is Iran? How do you even pronounce these words? None of the current news of the day meant anything, it was entirely shallow and devoid of history whose depth, he thought, was the point of teaching history. That the point of history was to have a well-established understanding of the past through which one may perceive the present with a wealth of knowledge.

He summarized by saying that he was being made into a fool, that he resented being made into a fool and that such an awful, pointless curriculum not only would destroy the motivations of earnest students but would result in a state and a society of useless buffoons.

Tal's chemistry teacher started crying before she finished reading the letter. His history teacher who was mostly just the wrestling coach sort of shrugged and everybody else pretended he didn't say anything. Had Tal got any sort of response to his earnest passion aside from sorrow or apathy he might have continued to engage with and care about society. Instead, he learned that it was futile to care.

A few weeks later, just before his fifteenth birthday, Tal's parents died in a car crash and he went to live with his aunt until he could be sent off to college.

Tal entered college disillusioned. His goals were to drink, smoke weed, and have sex though he still harbored a belief that he was supposed to do something grand with his life. He was special, "gifted", he was supposed to become someone and do something remarkable, so while being a Chemical Engineer was something he could accept it was not something worth working towards. Especially because chemistry was old science; chemistry was more or less solved; all the big revelations in chemistry had already occurred. And so as he looked into his future life as a Chemical Engineer he saw that what he would be doing with his life would be implementing decades or centuries old processes that would be unbearably boring. His life would be an unfulfilling desert. He failed to go to class and dropped out.

What makes life worth living? How do people do it?

Tal quickly learned that society has tools to deal with the unenthused. He spent a year working in sales jobs and tasted the bitter cruelty of this coercive society; he discovered that it is an absurd luxury to ask what makes life worth living since we most of us live in fear and anxiety, about earning enough money to give to someone else so that we might remain off the streets. What makes life worth living is that at least I am not living on the streets, at least I am not hungry, at least I am not those things. It is in running away successfully, escaping the coercion, that we are mostly concerned with, and that running toward some dream is a non-essential luxury.

Tal petitioned his aunt and with her support he got an Associate's Degree in computer programming.

This was a few years long era of hope and enthusiasm. All cylinders firing. Computers were New Science, there was all sorts of potential here to express something grand. Not as a web developer, no, not in his work itself which was like all jobs the same stupid thing over and over again, but rather as some personal groundbreaking enterprise using the tools that his work gave him the opportunity to master. For example, he became proficient in Lisp, one of the most powerful though arcane methods of

programming a computer, when he spent six months at one job doing all his professional work in ClojureScript (a type of Lisp). He was fired for this eventually, when another programmer tried to work on one of his projects, but this was okay since he was learning.

This continued. Learning various things on company time which were unimportant to the rote nature of his jobs. The fundamental drive was to discover what had already been achieved so that he could understand what needed to be done. Wikipedia already existed so there was no need to make a new Wikipedia. The rendering of three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface. Secure networking. What was missing? That was the search, to have an idea for something and then to check to see if it already exists.

This era ended when Tal came to understand the Smalltalk paradigm (he had been given full oversight on a web development project for a housing construction company, which he implemented using Seaside).

"Smalltalk" was something he had known about for years though only as a simple factoid like, "Object-oriented programming originated in the Smalltalk language" but actually using it felt like a slap in the face; this method of interacting with a computer was so superior that it felt offensive. Yes, the particular Smalltalk implementation he used seemed dated somehow, yes, the conventions were out of vogue (mouse buttons were not left, middle, right but red, yellow, and blue); but constrasted with all the rest of his experience using computers this was what a personal computing experience was supposed to be; this was it. And what it was, really, was the solution to the personal computer experience.

Staggered, he investigated it further and saw it all plainly: he learned about the Smalltalk project at Xerox PARC, about Alan Kay, about J.C.R. Licklider; he saw the history of how the Smalltalk System had been bastardized for underpowered hardware in the Macintosh, had been bastardized to a second degree by the socially powerful Microsoft in its Windows software; previously,

he also learned about Richard Stallman and Free Software; and putting it all together he had a definite understanding that personal computing, human-computer symbiosis, had in fact been solved. It was a only a matter of social conditions holding back their final expression. Here then was another case of a stubborn, stupid, coercive world mandating a terrible history curriculum against all the better wisdom of what could be. And so there was nothing for him to achieve here either.

As such, when he spun off the road driving too fast, hit the curb and totaled his car, when he got fired from his web development job and everything else it was not much of a tragedy; he was doing these stupid things because he did not care to keep what he had. Yes, he lost his girlfriend who mostly just wanted him to keep working in his unfulfilling career to pay for a baby, so what? Yes, he lost his paltry savings to cover the remainder of his loan on his now-totaled car, so what? If he had cared to keep these things, he would not have been willing to risk it on a mildly hedonist romp with his boss's daughter.

(And, moreover, he thought to himself, he had pushed his car past the limit because under-the-limit was still unsatisfying; he lost everything in a sense, sure, but he also lost nothing.)

Aunt Kendra

The day after the wreck Tal called a taxi and got a ride to his aunt's house.

Aunt Kendra lived in an old suburb far out of town. The foundation of her neighborhood were two front streets of affordable but nice houses built to be sold seventy years ago. As the neighborhood had grown from these front streets to fill two square miles there came many varied houses. Among the winding inner roads there were, for example, plenty of trailer homes, mostly well kept, and also among those winding roads was Aunt Kendra’s quaint house that had decades ago been built by a retired couple to serve as their final home.

Aunt Kendra was sitting on the back porch. She had one bare foot propped up in a chair across from her and on the ground was a pair of worn flip flops, sky blue. She was smoking a cigarette.

Tal had called her that morning. He had asked if he could stay for awhile and she had said, "Of course, Tal."

She took a drag from her cigarette and squinted her eyes.

There were obvious facts that came to mind, things not really worth considering but nonetheless were so obvious they had to appear. Whatever Tal’s situation might be exactly, the core truth was that

he had witnessed a new angle of the all-encompassing cruelty. Indeed, that was the truth. A truth that did not bear repeating and not worth reexamination. So, why come to mind? Well, there it is anyway. An annoying earworm of a thought. No, ultimately it was never any individual at fault for their given tragedy so much as it was just the nature of living this life. It was its innate cruelty; it was not "this" or "that" being cruel but The World itself. Not just ex-husbands, not just men, not just family, not just earthly churches with their hypocritical pastors, not just jobs, not just human society but The Entire World. Whether literally or poetically, we live in a fallen world ruled by Satan. Cruel to the powerful who are always hungry and dissatisfied, and cruel to the beautiful and humble who were mercilessly abused. The World was cruel to everyone.

Aunt Kendra took another drag.

So Tal had simply been witness to some new aspect of that cruelty. That was all. And could she judge him, could she judge anyone, for their particular reaction to that base fact of what it meant to be alive in this world?

Aunt Kendra finished her cigarette, slipped on her flip flops and moved to the front porch. She sat in a white plastic chair and waited for the taxi.

If she had ever found a satisfactory answer as to how somebody should respond to the world, some superior manner of staying afloat in this hell, she would be able to make some firm judgment and therefore give some firm advice. But the truth was that she did not know the answer. And, the longer she lived, the longer she doubted any suitable answer existed.

The taxi arrived.

Tal got out of the car, got his two bags from the trunk, and Aunt Kendra stood up. Tal walked the cracked sidewalk past the pecan tree in the yard, made it to the porch and Aunt Kendra smiled.

She said, "Nephew," and held her arms open.

Tal put his bags down and gave her a hug.

She continued, "Come out on the back porch and let's talk about it."

Tal took his bags to the guest room where he had stayed a few years before and then followed Aunt Kendra to the back porch. She opened the pack of cigarettes that lay on the iron table, lit one, offered another to Tal and sat down.

She asked, "Well, Tal. What's the plan?"

Tal sighed and said, "I don't know."

Time was up, wisdom had failed to produce anything novel. Though Kendra did not feel she had a solution, she felt she had to offer something and there was one suggestion that for most of her life she would have felt confident giving.

She said, "You consider going to church?"

Tal nodded.

Tal had thought of himself as an Atheist in his teenage years but when he really examined it he had found Atheism stupid, narrow and insubstantial. Atheism was more or less the belief that Christianity was wrong; or, rather, that a specific strawman idea of Christianity was wrong and this was an embarrassing position to hold because while it meant you thought Christians were wrong it also meant you were defining your beliefs based on what you assumed they believed. It was flimsy, half-baked.

He had heard a joke that clarified his opinion.

A comedian, an Atheist, had said, "There was a man who lived through the holocaust. He went through all the terrible death and evil and the Nazis and the racism. And then he lived the rest of his life as a good upstanding man so when he died he went to Heaven. The man showed up to the pearly gates and he got to meet God.

"The man was talking to God and he tells God a Holocaust joke.

"God says to the man, 'That's not funny. You shouldn't joke about that.'

"And the man said, well, I guess you just had to be there."

Tal had seen what was funny in the joke but realized it required a proud ignorance: it did not understand Christian theology. The comedian thought he was showing that Christians were stupid because if God was a loving God then why would He let things like the Holocaust happen? But could an open-minded Atheist really think Christians had not considered this? How could an intelligent Atheist think of Christians as oblivious to suffering in the world?

Here sat Aunt Kendra, smoking her cigarette. He saw in her kind, leathery-skinned face a countenance whose lifelong suffering was obvious. She could explain this easily. She would remark that we live in a fallen world ruled by Satan, of course, but that we're given Free Will to choose God-Jesus. There was no "gotcha" because it agreed with mainstream Christian thought: that's right, God was not there. God created the world, but God is no longer in the world, it's through faith that we make the choice to align with Jesus and salvation. That is the entire point.

So Tal was open to church.

He asked, "What church do you go to these days?"

Aunt Kendra seemed lost in thought but Tal knew she had heard him.

Kendra had not been to church in almost two years. It was a dangerous thing now to go to church. It threatened to close her off to her only intermittent solace of faith. So much as her mind and person had been battered through life so too had her faith. She felt like a person with a severe cataract, that there was an encroaching hardness over her spiritual eye: there was only a tiny point of light that was ever visible any more and she knew having to encounter the church had been what made her into a mostly hardened cynic. She had to stop going to church or she felt she would lose God entirely; if she touched her beliefs any more, if she saw them reflected in another person, then the cataract might close and she would be left entirely blind.

Her spiritual-cataract had developed like this.

She had gone to church all her life. She had been a member of three Presbyterian churches, had occasionally visited Methodist churches and, more rarely, with the attitude of a respectful tourist, had been to a handful of Catholic masses. She had even gone to a Mormon service once and she prided herself on her nonjudgmental attitude in that no matter whether she agreed on the specifics or not, the important thing was the spiritual life, was the divine life that must be beyond this world and that here, in this invisible divinity, was the only possible respite; that, indeed, out there, out there in the future, there was a heaven where all things were made right. Knowing this to be the important thing made squabbling over the specific details an embarrassingly childish endeavor.

She had, however, over the years, been forced to consider some of the specific details. The cynicism had worked slowly but persistently. She remembered being relatively young, in her early thirties, suffering a pang of sacrilegious shame when she had read a certain story, that of Jesus curing the ten lepers -- not the most important story in the Bible, not the foundation of any particular faith -- but had still felt with a terrible certainty, "That's not how Jesus would have behaved."

She then tried to read the Bible less literally, and less literally, and she always gave it a wide degree of levity in its expression so that it could be right; but after more than a decade of fighting it she had to conclude that, as sorry as she was to admit it, that the Bible too was a product of the world, that ultimately it had been written by people, so that it was not a uniquely holy and divinely correct gift but was rather the result of a struggle by flawed people to try and capture Jesus in text, to try to capture God, and to try to offer this glimpse of the Holy. The Bible was a noble effort, she had concluded, but her vision around the edges was undoubtedly growing cloudy.

She kept going to church, of course, she kept stumbling along the path for another twenty years because there was something to Jesus, whatever He was, and there was something to the divine. There was God. And, moreover, while the truth might have been something vague that she could not capture

in specifics, that no book could capture, there were still so many people who found themselves in this vague but certain truth. There was fellowship.

But finally she had asked herself a question that had resulted in her current exile. She had asked herself a question that made it so clear to her that she was not just a person with an understandable amount of cynicism running in her veins but that she was, in fact, a full-blown cynic, and that she was on the verge of losing even that precious pinpoint of light.

The question was, "Why is the church?"

There had been a wealthy and powerful man in her congregation, who had been one of the most influential politicians in the state, who was a congressman, and she had personally perceived him as a man of particular avarice, deception, and cruelty. This congressman, she knew, was not stupid; in fact, he was very smart. And yet, when he gave speeches that would be shown on television he would make the stupidest arguments possible so that witnessing this inspired an untenable amount of unholy venom in Kendra. Her judgment of him was extremely clear: that man is willfully doing evil, acting as an evil person, and he was doing it under the guise of stupidity; his scheme, so to speak, was to do evil and then for that evil to be blamed, socially, not on him and his selfishness, but on stupidity; that was the act that he was putting on, and it engendered so much ire because Kendra had known many, many stupid people with incredible hearts, who were angels, and to see this wicked man in church inspired rage in her, Sunday after Sunday.

She asked herself, why was he there? Was he just there in church for appearances? Was he just there for social ties? Why was he there?

And, tragically, she answered her question: he was there for the teachings, the teachings that absolved him of his worldly evil. They were this: first, only Jesus Christ is perfect -- no human is perfect -- therefore it is understandable that you are evil. And second, your evil is forgiven so long as you practice faith in the validity of the story of Jesus Christ. So, Kendra asked, why ever change? Why

ever grow? Go on, rape and pillage and torture and be as cruel as you like, so long as you come here and recite the Nicene Creed. And then, cataract hardening, why did they recite this creed in every service instead of the two commandments? To ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’, and to ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.'

The cynicism struck like lightning: why did the church exist? Was it to assuage the conscience of people like this man?

It was not God who was at fault. It was The World.

She no longer wanted to be considered a Christian, not because she didn't have her own positive opinion of what that meant, which through the pinpoint hole she could still appreciate its beauty, but because it seemed like, in the wider world, the word meant something else entirely. And likewise with "God": she would say to herself with that minuscule but resolute faith that she believed in God, but she knew this meant something else to most people.

So, she was in exile.

She ashed her cigarette and said, "There's a little Unitarian church I go to sometimes."

Tal nodded and said, "Maybe I'll check it out sometime."

His aunt nodded back, scratched her head, but they both knew that it would never happen.

There was a pause.

Aunt Kendra said, "I got a call from Benji today. He's going to be in town tomorrow."

Tal said, "Yeah."

He waited, then said again, "Yeah."

Tal finished his cigarette, put it out, gave his aunt a hug, went inside, and laid in the bed in the guestroom.

His aunt smoked another cigarette.

Benji

Benji was Tal's older brother. Ronald had named Benji after Benjamin Franklin, as Benjamin Franklin was Ronald's idol. When Benji was still in the womb Ronald had spent a lot of time thinking about the future of this child and he was particularly happy with the name "Benjamin" because even if the child did not live up to the name in the sense of being a genius that altered the course of history as a Great Man, which Ronald felt was somewhat out of his hands as a father, then the name could still be meaningful as a reference to one-hundred dollar bills, Benji could fulfill his destiny by becoming rich.

Benji sat across from Tal at a table in a *Cici's Pizza* buffet. Benji was shaking red pepper flakes onto his pizza while Benji's wife, along with Aunt Kendra, chaperoned Tal's nephew and niece through the buffet line.

Benji said, "You need to get a job."

Tal said, "Right."

Benji had an idea and pulled his cellphone out of its holster. He interacted with it and then brought up a picture, showing it to Tal, "Look at this gun I just bought."

It was a handgun and it was made of metal.

Tal said, "Cool."

Benji put the phone away, somewhat discouraged. He went to take a bite of his pizza, but then said, "You can't be a burden on Aunt Kendra like this."

Tal said, "I'm sorry."

"Motherfucker," Benji said, "I'm sorry you lost your job, I get it. You go wild sometimes, I did it too. Hell, I got fired from a bunch of jobs. But you gotta make money."

Benji's wife arrived at the table and pulled out chairs in such a way that the children understood where to sit. There was a moment here of connection between Benji and his wife, where the topic of discussion was tacitly understood; she understood that Benji would be imparting the importance of the need to make money.

Very often, in the past, in response to something Benji had said, Tal had satisfied the urge to argue some philosophical point. For Benji, in the right mood, on the right subject, listening to Tal's response was like going to the zoo; Tal would say something absurd and Benji would engage with the idea in the same way he would look at a giraffe. This spectacle of Tal proudly brandishing a bizarre intellectual shape and Benji gaping in response had been the most reliable dynamic of their adult relationship. Benji, however, was not in the right mood to gawk at a giraffe.

Tal had wanted to say, "Only the Federal Reserve is authorized to make money," to open up the discussion, but because of the seriousness of the topic, his brother would simply respond by calling him a smartass. Tal would assure Benji that he had understood his point, in that, of course, he did not literally mean printing money, he meant something more akin to "accumulating capital". Having then established this understanding Tal would posit that the accumulation of capital did not seem to him a

worthwhile pursuit in itself but that capital rather served a subsidiary function in the service of something else and that Tal's actual problem was that he did not have that "something else".

In the best case scenario encountering this idea of "something else" would be the bizarre creature for Benji to wonder at, as, for him, "making money" was indeed a worthwhile pursuit in itself. And in Benji's rebuttal he would make a point that he *did* make money and that Tal had failed to understand him. This was because Benji had a synonymous view of "money" and "value", so that money was value and that therefore the act of accruing dollars was evidence that one had created value. He accumulated money, so he made value, and there was no difference between the two things.

Finally, Tal would make a last refutation by positing that when he worked at the web development firms,he was not "making money" so much as siphoning it because hardly anything he made was valuable; he could express making websites for outright scam non-profits; he could express eCommerce websites that made awful products with superior and less expensive alternatives; he could express extensive wastes of time on projects that never launched; and he could express that the only truly good organization he thought he had done work for (a nature preserve, in fact) would've been better off with a Facebook page. This would be the end of the discussion because this would be the primal source of their subjective differences, the definition of "valuable".

"Of course you made something valuable," his brother would have said in response to the non-profit scam website, "Someone paid you to make it."

Anyway, the argument was pure fantasy because the topic was too serious for Benji. Instead, Tal sat there quietly.

Benji said, "You gotta make money man, you can't rely on other people."

Tal stifled a fierce urge to express a conceptual polar bear but just said, "Right."

"Jesus, dude," Benji said, "Fuck. I'll hire you. I'll figure something out."

Benji's wife said, "Tal is a smart guy, I'm sure he'll be alright."

Tal said, "Thanks."

Benji looked up from his plate at his wife.

He said, "Smart? Shit, he's living with Aunt Kendra."

#

When Tal and Aunt Kendra got back home, Aunt Kendra asked Tal if he wanted a cigarette. She had smoked a cigarette in the car on the way home, but now it was a different time and a different place and that called for a cigarette. Tal nodded and they went out on the back porch.

The early summer was hot and humid. The sun was still in the sky for awhile yet.

Aunt Kendra lit her cigarette.

She said, "Just so you know, I don't consider you a burden."

She tossed the lighter onto the iron table towards Tal and it clattered.

He picked it up and said, "I didn't think you did."

She was scratching the bottom of her feet and she said, "I just want what's best for you. Have you given it any thought? Any plans?"

No. Tal did not have a plan. Instead, he had an amorphous vision that had been hastily summoned, mostly while he slept, that suggested he must do something artistic.

He liked books and he liked reading but he had tried to write a novel one time and he had been thoroughly disgusted by his efforts. In one sense he had succeeded: he had filled one and a half notebooks with words so that there was a start and there was an end. But as to what the text embodied, well, he was unhappy with the results. He would come up with the idea for a character, like he had "The Spider Witch", and he had written about how "The Spider Witch" lived in a trailer deep in the woods and drank beer and that her magic became manifest by drinking to the point of vomiting; she had these spells which she would write as poems; the spell-poems would just be ideas; and, then, to make the spells become real, she had to drink a bunch of beer and vomit on a fire. Tal thought that was

a fine idea, sort of, but then what? Okay. Another character. Now what happens is there's a quirky guy called "The Sun Wizard", and this guy's deal is that while he was ultimately powerful, he was confused, had no clue really, what to do with his powers (or how they worked, exactly).

Tal thought the major problem was that the characters lacked motivation, or maybe purpose; they popped up out of nowhere for no reason. Nothing significant happened, or, if something potentially significant seemed to happen, it failed to connect meaningfully to anything else. For example, he knew he wanted The Sun Wizard and The Spider Witch to meet up, so he wrote a scene where The Sun Wizard stumbled upon The Spider Witch's camp, and there was a contrived conversation that would never happen between such people where the witch talked about trying to taking a nap on an innertube floating on the lake; how she couldn't ever fall asleep because if she relaxed she would inevitably float to the shore, which would disturb her, so she could never relax anyway, and so the whole thing was impossible. Then, The Sun Wizard told her of a problem he had (though, whether it was a problem or not he was unsure), that he had lost a sock, and, as they sat around the fire, as she got drunk, she jotted down a poem about the sock, which was awful, but, finally, after several more beers, she succeeded in her magic, vomitted on the fire, and informed him that the sock was down the road in a parking lot outside of a laundry facility.

When Tal had read the whole thing back to himself he was so disgusted that he burnt the notebooks.

Still, he liked reading, and he found a good degree of satisfaction in writing reviews on Goodreads. But that was not a plan.

Tal said to his aunt, "I'm not totally sure."

She ashed her cigarette. She took a drag.

"Tell you what," she said, "You check in with me over breakfast, or dinner, or lunch, you tell me what you did the day before, and we'll go from there."

Tal nodded. He didn't want any more of the cigarette, so he broke the cherry off, and mounted it in the ashtray in the middle of the table. They sat for a moment. The weather was nice and the general atmosphere recalled Tal's childhood, sitting with his dad smoking cigarettes on the back porch. But there was still the unsettled discontent.

Tal said, "Do you mind if I go to my room?"

#

Tal sat at the desk in the guest bedroom. He opened a notebook and clicked a pen.

He wrote on the top line, in big letters, "To Do".

He had done this many times before. Each time he had written some things down and then, each time, he had achieved those things. But, as achieving those things had led him to this point now, he understood they were not the ultimate answer and so, while maybe they seemed like they should be obvious inclusions, Tal found them difficult to add to the list.

On the first line he wrote, "Car?"

On the second line, after some nonverbal churning of the mind, he wrote, "Money?"

Why and how was it, he thought, that for some people, including himself when he was just a little bit younger, there were so many obvious things "To Do"? There were things that were self-evidently worth chasing, things worth trying without even having to ponder; as though by nature of being a human there came with it a sort of starter-set of activities. Welcome to the experience of being human, try out our activities! Have you considered "Car"? It's quite fun!

He wrote, slowly, in script, in the margin, "*The Fat of Youth*."

His phone buzzed.

There was a text message from Benji. It read: "Do you not see that you're a failure who is living in his mom's basement?"

Tal looked around his aunt's guest room and noticed a pastel quilt laying on the bed; how could Benji imagine that Tal was unaware of his own situation?

His phone buzzed again, it said, "What girl do you think is gonna want to fuck you?"

Tal read this and felt Benji had a point worth considering.

He clicked the pen and wrote on the third line, "Girl?"

Tal responded by sending, "I haven't really thought about it."

Again, much like with the "make money" sentiment, Tal wanted to argue a point, which was on the distinction between "girl" as opposed to "fucking"; on the one hand, there was definitely the possibility of Tal enjoying having an intimate relationship with a woman in his life. He knew this, he felt this; he would like to be in love, he missed that a lot. But, on the other hand, as far as fucking went, he was ambivalent.

Tal could feel that, seventy miles away, Benji was getting angry.

"He hadn't thought about it," Benji would be thinking.

Benji would have read that text and then said to his wife, to no one in particular, really, "Fucking Tal," and then, after shuffling off the couch, he would have announced to no one in particular, "I'm going to get beer."

Tal intuited all of this, and he was right. That was what had happened.

Benji's son, who was six, had said, "Can I go?"

And Benji had said, "Not this time."

#

When Benji arrived at the gas station, he threw the truck's console shifter into park, and, before going into the store, got his phone out.

He sent a message to Tal, "What are you doing?"

Tal, in addition to having his "To-Do" notebook open, had turned on his computer and booted up *World of Warcraft*. He was not really playing the game, did not really intend on playing the game, all he was doing was logging into characters he had played before and remembering his past achievements.

Tal read the message on his phone, "What are you doing?"

If he told Benji that he was playing *World of Warcraft,* then his brother would stop sending him messages; his brother would lose hope and, in losing hope, stop trying to influence Tal's life. Tal wondered why Benji cared so much, why he got angry, why he insulted Tal, why it mattered in the least. He assumed that Benji felt the need to act as Tal's dad, to say the sort of things Ronald would have said if he were around. But, Tal knew, Ronald would not have said those things to him; those were the things he would have said to Benji. To Tal, Ronald would have said something like, "Scoot. Wanna hit the batting cages?"

Tal sighed, logged out of the game, looked at the list that most recently said, "Girl?" and he tried to recall any feelings he had about his most recent ex-girlfriend. Embarrassment, mostly, a vague cloud of embarrassment. Something about letting her down. Like, that, in actual truth, he had not liked her enough, but had deceived himself, and had therefore deceived her about it, and now the truth was out and everybody felt bad. He did think she was pretty; he thought she had nice skin, and that it was charming that she freckled in the sun. But the truth was that the big answer, whatever that meant, was not there with her, that he had performed this deception on credit, on hope, assuming that he would perhaps uncover this big answer and everything would turn out for the best, but now that it was clearly over and everyone was disappointed, he was embarrassed.

Tal sent a message that said, "I'm thinking about girls."

#

Benji knew that the pretty girl would be working; she was pretty in a rural trashy way, which is to say, she grew up in the country, and she drove a beatup old truck, but she sure as hell never had a horse; and Benji wanted to impress her, and Benji knew how to impress her: he had bought the most expensive beer, which was *Michelob Ultra*, and he had bought the most expensive dip, which was *Copenhagen*, and, when he paid, he opened his wallet and took out a hundred dollar bill.

As the pretty young girl was making change, Benji's phone vibrated.

Benji read Tal's message, "I'm thinking about girls", and laughed out loud.

The pretty girl gave Benji a playful look and said, "What's so funny?"

Benji smiled and said, "Nothing. Thank you."

Benji carried the case of beer to his truck, put it in the bed, looked around, and then pulled out two aluminum cans. He brought the cans into the cab, turned on the engine, and cracked one open.

He sent Tal a message, "Me too, lol."

Tal's memory had gone back to Steph, who was the first girl he had seriously dated, when he was sixteen, and for whom he could very clearly remember having many feelings.

Tal responded, "You remember Steph?"

Tal, in thinking about Steph, was also thinking about sex. He was thinking about sex but also he was thinking about *World of Warcraft*. And he knew that there was a melancholic truth here that he had to approach gently.

He was sixteen, he was a teenager, and sex mattered to him as much as anything could matter to anyone. If he wrote a to-do list at that time, then several aspects of "sex" would have taken up the majority of the list. And, indeed, he and Steph achieved many of those things together.

He clung to the vivid and satisfying moments. The satisfaction of how her clothes fit on her body, the satisfaction of getting naked together. The sort of magnetic, accelerating action of their

bodies. He could call to mind many sexual moments, vulgar and vibrant, that he, in his memory, saw as ultimately satisfying.

But there was more.

He and Steph were laying in bed one evening; they had been doing drugs, they had finished a long romp; and Tal remembered laying in bed and wishing that she would leave, had been wishing that she would leave for a long while, because he wanted to play *World of Warcraft*. Now, there was a delicate balance because if he just said that, said "Please go home, so that I can play video games," then she might not come back to more romance later. So he waited and, eventually, she did leave, and as soon as she was gone he logged into the game. This was the thing he remembered most clearly: that there had been a horny person typing in General Chat, talking about how badly they wanted to have sex and Tal had thought, and even said, "It's really not that great."

There was a balance that he recognized even then, at sixteen, that yes, he got hungry and he had severe desires, and the satisfaction of those desires was something real, palpable, material. That sexual desire and sexual satisfaction was something good and solid and whole, and that in a certain context could be understood as a foundation of existential satisfaction. But then, even then, in that youthful era, he could see the cracks showing that, no, actually, it... well, it kind of was not actually enough. He had wanted to play *World of Warcraft.*

Tal was sitting at his desk, pondering that line, "Girl?"

He sighed.

Over the years, his view on sex had undergone a slow transformation. His opinion was that sex itself, which is to say coitus or fellatio, or whatever two-person act, was, in the context of satisfying sexual desire, not as good as masturbation. He regretted this was his honestly held opinion. This opinion had subtly crystalized over time and the moment he realized he held it was when he noticed that, in porn, a lot of the time, in order for the guy to actually cum, he had to jerk himself off. But, he

would argue with himself, that is not to say actual sex with another person is worthless, just that it has different motivations. Primarily, he would argue to himself, it was a medium of interpersonal expression; it was a back and forth of listening and doing; the sex-havers, which is to say the good sex-havers who are enjoying themselves, are people who take this hobby of roles and functions and emotions and do their little interpersonal dances, tickling each other in just such ways; they were playing a game of fun; they were engaging in a cooperative, communicative act of connection. So, in this sense, the motivation was about finding the right person to play with; the thing that really mattered was who you were playing with and the sort synergistic satisfaction that you got out of the act.

Sex, he had concluded, was a great hobby; a solid, high tier hobby, about intimacy and connection, up there with jazz and team sports and all sorts of other things. It was up there with *World of Warcraft*.

Benji sent a text, "Of course I remember Steph. She had green eyes."

Tal remembered shortly before he and Steph broke up: he had blown her off to participate in a 40-man raid encounter in *World of Warcraft*, which he likened to playing a piece of music in a symphony. The tanks, those with their shields who took all the beating from the enemies, those who led the direction of the raid, they were the percussion, the rhythm section; the healers who kept everyone alive, they were the woodwinds and the brass; the damage dealers, who were most numerous and provided the fullness of the experience, they were the strings. The 40-man team learned and performed a raid encounter, a "boss fight", like an orchestra learned and performed a piece of music. Not only that, but over time, they grew together; there were months long social dynamics within the group, who would get what pieces and when; who left and who joined; there were weeks of frustration and there were weeks of relief; his time playing with the guild in high school was beautiful and, in retrospect, clearly, more special than his jaunts with Steph.

Even so, that too had faded long ago, and, in reflection of this, Tal turned off his computer, and laid his head on his notebook.

#

Benji had drank the two beers and had tossed the cans out the window. He pulled over to the side of the country road, went to the bed of his truck, and took out two more cans.

He sent Tal a text, "You remember Andrea?"

#

The problem was the vacancy of any sense of experiencing a precious gift. There were those moments of such beauty, of such thickness, of such passionate exploration of the world, of new things, of the inherent value of everything; was it the girl? Was it the sex? Was it the music?

Tal, head laying on the notebook, sadly underlined, "The Fat of Youth".

He looked at his phone. Did he remember Andrea?

He remembered Andrea, they had briefly met one cold November night. There had been a bonfire in the country and there had been drinking around the bonfire. The nature of Andrea was this: she was a young woman, and Benji knew her as the daughter of one of his business associate's neighbors; she lived in the same rural county. Benji had tried to seduce her, had made some headway, had gone drinking together at the bonfire, for example, but she ultimately stopped talking to him.

Benji had thought her eventual disinterest had been because she had realized that he was old; in particular, he thought it was because his hair had begun to thin and that she had noticed.

Tal disagreed, it had nothing to do with his hair, or his age even, really, it was rather a sort of spiritual disconnect that arose from an uncertain emotional quality at whose base was an unsatisfied question about "his life".

Tal remembered coming to this understanding of intimacy; he had taken a summer speech class at the community college; he was not yet completely broken up with his girlfriend at the time, but they

were technically on hiatus and so he had an eye on the girls in this class. There had been a group assignment, Tal had been put in a group with the most attractive girl in the class, they had all worked together one day in the library, and then, the sharpest part of this memory, because it was such a mystery to Tal then, was that the attractive girl asked another guy in the group for a ride home. Tal was stunned because this other guy was ugly, not smart, and had not contributed much toward the group project. Not only that, but, for the record, Tal had a cool car, which the girl could not have failed to see.

Tal had sat in his cool car and watched as the pretty girl got in the ugly guy's old sedan and while his ego was hurt, his curiosity was peaked even more. There was a reason that happened. And this was the reasoning that came to him: the difference between Tal and that guy was that that guy, on that occasion, had been cooler than Tal. And what being cool meant, was that he was more chill. And what being chill meant, was that he was more relaxed. He was the most comfortable guy to be around, even if he was stupid, even if he was ugly, and that was what mattered.

Furthermore, Tal reflected, what made someone relaxed and comfortable was a confidence in their current path in life. That was the key.

After all, Tal, at that time, was stressed out. He did not want to go to school. He did not want to address the problems he was having with his girlfriend-maybe-soon-to-be-wife. He was not looking forward to anything in his future. At that point, during that summer, Tal had zero real confidence in how he was living his life and so, simply, Tal was not cool.

Likewise, in regards to Andrea, this was Benji's trouble. He had a good amount of money, sure, and he was good enough looking too; girls flirted with him often; but his work, whatever it was exactly, was soulless -- Benji had told Tal his work only existed for the benefit of insurance companies -- and, as the intimacy developed, this would come up, that Benji was not, in fact, ultimately satisfied with "making money", that ultimately he could not relax, could not chill, was ultimately not cool, and that

he was not comfortable to be around because he was going to die and his life was going to have been a pointless waste.

Andrea eventually witnessed this truth and so it was over.

The unaddressed pointlessness of Benji's life, Tal considered: that was why he was trying to help Tal.

Tal texted Benji, "Sorry, yes. I remember Andrea. Not my type."

Being comfortable in one's path in life, Tal thought, could take any number of forms. It didn't have to be your job. You could have a cause; or maybe you're comfortable because you believe in the ultimate value of your family; maybe it was the value of your religion, maybe it was your faith, maybe your country. Maybe you were comfortable because you had passions that made life worth living; maybe Tal, when he was younger, was chiefly comfortable because he knew with such certainty what he wanted: he wanted to have sex with Steph, he wanted to explore the game of sex.

Car?

Money?

Girl?

Whatever quality it was that had made these things so uniquely good when he was younger had faded. He knew that, he accepted that; it was this melancholy acceptance now; he had no idea what was worth doing; his comfort level with his life was zero; he was very uncool.

Tal closed his notebook and laid on the bed with the pastel quilt.

He saw Benji then in his mind, Benji who was nearing forty, and he thought perhaps Benji was avoiding this truth, consciously or not. He saw Benji in a scenario where he had misplaced his keys, was in the process of looking for them and, even though he had already checked multiple times, he still put his hand through all his pockets. The keys weren't there. He checked the kitchen counter, the keys weren't there, so he went through his pockets again.

Sammy

The next morning, Tal had breakfast with his aunt.

She said, "Any updates?"

Tal said, "I talked to Benji last night. And I thought about it a lot. The plan is this: to live a happy, contented, comfortable life."

Kendra said, "Sounds good."

Tal said, "Aunt Kendra, what would you be doing if I wasn't here?"

She recoiled, grimaced, but very quickly it passed.

She said, "I. I don't know, Tal."

Suddenly Tal realized: his aunt had no dreams either. She had no hopes. She had given up completely, her perspective was not coolness, so much as total resignation. And, having neither hopes nor dreams, she had nothing that united her with anyone else in the world. And, being so ununited with the world, she was lonely.

Tal already understood that she had lost a significant amount of something, that it was obvious that her church life had fallen away, but he had not yet seen through her initial facade of contentedness to this truth. Now he had.

Tal laughed, "Well, I tell you what. Every day, we have breakfast or lunch or dinner, and you check-in with me, alright?"

#

After breakfast, Tal sat on the sofa with Aunt Kendra and watched TV.

They watched a cooking show.

As Tal watched the TV, thoughts began to form in his mind, thoughts about all this life and comfort and hope and purpose thing. That, the truth of the matter was, most people are not all that comfortable, not all that many people are cool, that his case was the default, and was not too obscure at all. Young people, maybe, had a tendency to be cool for awhile, to have dreams and to live toward them (the "fat of youth", as he had called it), but most people, he thought, were more like his aunt: they had largely given up and they hoped that, someday, something would come along and give them purpose.

An advertisement came on the TV for for an Italian restaurant and Aunt Kendra said, "That looks good."

That, right there, Tal thought, was how most people, more or less, lived their lives. In the abstract, anyway. They didn't know what they wanted, they didn't have hopes or dreams; whether that was because they hadn't found them yet, like him, or because they had satisfied them and discovered they were insubstantial, like his brother, or because they had given up on dreaming because their dreams turned out impossible, like his aunt with her faith; so most people went about not exactly aimlessly, but openly waiting, and then something like the restaurant advertisement got things working again: here was a little dream, the spaghetti looked good, it became something they wanted, and then,

right there on the screen it showed, two can dine for only twenty dollars -- it was possible too; so these little dreams carried them on through life day-to-day.

Aunt Kendra said, "We should do that for dinner."

Tal said, "Okay."

The thought felt solid, his mind had begun to buzz. How this piece of a thought was to develop was yet unclear, but it had that sense to it, felt like there was just enough substance that it would grow into significance.

Then he said, "Aunt Kendra, I'm inspired."

She looked at him.

He said, "I don't have a plan yet, but I have a plan for making a plan."

She was sitting two spots down from him and she raised her eyebrows.

"Well," she said, "Godspeed then, nephew."

Tal went to his room, opened the notebook to the "To-Do" page, crossed off the three items, and, at the bottom he wrote, "Find a Dream."

The shift was in this passive to active search. Obviously, the answer did not yet already exist within him. He had perhaps exhausted all those dreams that came to the person sitting and waiting. So then, the key was exploration. It was obvious. He would not wait for an advertisement on television, would not wait for a suggestion from the greater world, after all, that had not been enough for him; he would have to go exploring. He didn't have to be certain of it right away, he only had to start exploring. His only hobby at the moment was reading books and writing reviews on Goodreads; what sort of dream might that look like? He knew that writing reviews itself was not a feasible thing, did not quite check the boxes of purpose; but maybe, he thought, you know, a dream would be to be something like a "Siskel and Ebert", doing a show.

His first direction then was to go to YouTube and see what sorts of book review shows existed.

He searched, "Book Review", and started scrolling.

He could easily rule out a good majority of the videos; most of these people were following a particular dream that Tal could discard: they wanted to be YouTubers. They wanted attention, they wanted subscribers, they wanted an audience. And Tal thought that, while there was nothing wrong with that dream, it was not quite the dream for him. It seemed again to be a matter of putting the cart in front of the horse; a matter of accruing money for its own sake; it was like the idea of "making money" with his brother. That just because someone watched your video did not necessarily mean you were doing something good. It wasn't until you had something good that it mattered; the attention and the audience, those had to be in service of "something else".

So, chiefly, the videos he clicked on were there to get clicks. Yes, the person did, probably, like books and liked sharing their opinions, but the authenticity was in question. For example, was this person sharing their honest opinion? Or were they sharing an opinion that they hoped would gain them more attention? Even if it were their honest opinion, how could he know? The signals that the videos gave, from their clickbait thumbnails, to their immediate callouts to like and subscribe, to the particularly faux presentation of a person that was just so excited by everything, made him doubt that this were true.

Then he clicked on a review of *Twilight*, done by a pretty girl.

She was not excited, she was contemplative. There was attention put into the video by the author, but the attention was somehow focused less on controlling the experience of the viewer and more on something else, like... the video was how *she* wanted the video to be.

She sat in front of her computer, a comfortable distance away, holding this book. Next to her on her desk was an attractive glass of lemonade with a blue straw.

"Why did she like *Twilight*?" she asked.

Well, actually, at first, she didn't really like *Twilight*, not that she thought it was bad, either. She had rather been forced into *Twilight*, because it was the book that took up the most space in her perceptual library when she was younger, because *Twilight* was the most prominent option available, and she mused about this library of life, this library of society, which books are offered to us, and why it is that we we know of any particular book, why we are given any choice. When she was sixteen, the library of society really only had the one book to offer, and that book was *Twilight*. Did I like that choice, did it matter? Am I even talking about books? Anyway, she read them all, because that was just God's Plan, she supposed, and, now, because of that prominent choice she had been given and accepted, she had all this knowledge of the *Twilight* books; that knowledge itself had then come to take up a good amount of space on the shelves of her current library of life, so to speak (I'm not making sense); what she was trying to say, she said, was that when life gives you lemons (and, presumably, water and sugar and glasses and so forth), make lemonade. When life gives you an encyclopedic knowledge of *Twilight*, and a YouTube channel, make a YouTube video about *Twilight*, so that is what I did. I made lemonade.

She drank some lemonade.

"I love lemonade," she said, "And I also love *Twilight*."

The video was twenty-three minutes long and he watched until the end.

He liked it. There was something there. It clearly wasn't the YouTube vehicle itself, that wasn't the dream. And it wasn't the book review itself either, though the book review was completely respectable, it was the way she had used the book review and the way she had used YouTube as a means of expressing herself.

Tal watched another of her videos. Then he watched another.

He looked at his journal. He looked at "Find a Dream."

There was something here.

Tal went to smoke a cigarette and discovered that his aunt was taking a nap. He stood on the back porch and thought about *Twilight*. He had an opinion on *Twilight*.

He went back inside, navigated to the *Twilight* video, and he left a comment, "shit book, 2/5, bella shoulda become a vamp at the end."

He sat back in his chair and pondered.

This was something.

#

That night when Tal had the takeout Italian with his aunt he told her about it.

"I'm thinking about making a YouTube channel."

Aunt Kendra had never watched YouTube, so she heard him say these words but they held no weight or meaning.

She said, "I don't know what that means, but I will support you so long as you work hard at it."

Tal hugged his aunt.

After dinner, Tal went for a walk through the neighborhood, which was an evening routine he had done hundreds of times while living at his aunt's house before, and which passed in such a way that he never observed much of his surroundings so much as the free flow of his thoughts. He knew he had a lot of book reviews on Goodreads, and he remembered them all pretty well, but there was a sort of failure to see how any of them might translate to something like the ones he had seen earlier that day. When he got back from his walk, he would sit down to his computer, re-read some of his old reviews, and then perhaps watch some more videos, taking notes; it was an exploration, something would click. The idea was to come up with a pilot video.

When he got back from his walk, he sat down to his computer, opened his web browser, and saw that he had a YouTube notification.

She had liked his comment.

She had responded: "That happens in *Life and Death.*"

Tal looked at this comment.

Bella gets turned into a vampire at the end of the book?

He looked up the plot synopsis of *Life and Death: Twilight Reimagined* on Wikipedia.

He couldn't believe it.

In *Twilight*, toward the end of the book, Bella is attacked and bitten by a vampire, only to be saved by Edward, her forbidden love interest (forbidden because he is a vampire), who sucks out the vampire venom, making it so that she doesn't get turned into a vampire. In *Life and Death: Twilight Reimagined*, where the characters' genders have been changed - Bella is replaced by Beau, and Edward replaced by Edythe - the same attack occurs, except this time Beau is not saved by Edythe, Edward does not suck out the vampire venom, so that Bella (Beau), becomes a vampire, and then their forbidden love is reconciled.

This plot element in the original book had been extremely frustrating to Tal.

He responded to her comment, "You're not gonna believe this, but almost my entire review on Goodreads was a rant about how it was bullshit that Bella doesn't get turned into a vampire. I was like, the book was obviously originally meant for that to happen, it's this satisfying ending that we want, the two get together as vampires, but the editor or the publisher or whoever was like, Nah, deny them. Deny them the satisfaction. Make them buy three more books first:" and he posted a link to his review.

He posted another comment, "Unbelievable!"

#

Over the next week, Tal spent a good amount of his free time brainstorming and making false starts on possible scripts for a video. He felt like he needed to express some authentic point, and while he agreed with his own reviews, none of it seemed quite interesting or important enough when he imagined it as a video.

She had not responded to his later comments, to his review, but he didn't really expect her to either; she had almost 100,000 subscribers and it was a lot to ask a stranger, especially a busy and successful stranger, to read some random person's review.

Between working on his own ideas, he devoured the rest of the girl's backlog and he started to think of her as "Sammy", which was her name, of course, but she became Sammy, and not this particular personality on YouTube. All of her videos were good. Every single one of her videos were good. And as he watched them more, he started to see more in them, started to appreciate more and more this wonderful self-expression.

And then, one night, after rewatching the *Twilight* video for the third time, he had a terrible realization. He loved Sammy.

Dune

Sammy, being more of an artist and less of a YouTuber, did not release videos on a regular schedule. Instead, when she finished a video, then she posted it. She had been making videos for two and a half years and, on average, she released a video once a month.

Tal could not wait for her next video, so he joined Twitter.

On Twitter, Sammy had posted pictures and sort of half-updates on what she was doing, as well as "anything that wouldn't ever end up in a video."

She had posted a joke, it said, "Well, it's bedtime somewhere."

She was so warm.

She had posted a picture of herself posing next to a cactus.

She was so beautiful.

She had retweeted a humorous response where someone had dunked on her.

She was just, so... *right*.

So, here was something. But as far as his emulation of Sammy; well, he was trying.

Tal had chiefly been working on a review of *Harry Potter*, because he thought he had something fairly unique to say, and that, also, it was a popular book, so it was as good of a place to start as any. He thought his overall point was solid: he felt that, since the books were chiefly written for children, and since the books had become a sort of cultural phenomenon, there was a limit to what the author could do with the characters as they aged, went through puberty, physically matured and such, so that, as written, they didn't really act as teenagers. So that, even though the main characters are supposed to be eighteen years old by the end, they still act like they are twelve. He had examples. For instance, there's this situation at the end of the series where Harry and Hermione end up camping together alone for months, sleeping in the same tent, but nothing happens between them. Why not? They're teenagers, they're doing something important together, they trust each other completely, they're alone. There is no possible way that they don't have sex, or that, at least, the subject comes up. Not that he thought the book needed to have a sex scene between Harry and Hermione, Tal clarified, only that the book *couldn't* have a sex scene: the audience and the book's cultural position made such an expression untenable.

But Tal found that the recordings of himself sitting there in front of his camera and saying such things did not make for a very interesting video. Indeed, the written version of the review was superior. He needed to do what Sammy did, where it was though she was talking about "life" rather than a specific book; that she was sharing some core part of herself in making her videos, but he couldn't quite understand how she did that.

His best idea for approaching this problem was to pick a book that reflected what he was going through with Sammy, this difficult emotional situation where a character realizes they're in love with someone that they cannot be with. But, as a point of fact, he didn't know of many books like that, and he definitely didn't have a particular opinion on any such book; he liked books generally, and he had a

couple hundred reviews under his belt, but romance was a very, very small part of his repertoire. *Twilight* had not been his thing; he had only read it because a girlfriend had asked.

He was fairly stumped.

A total of two weeks had passed since he had been living with his aunt. She knew that Tal had kept busy, she had seen him focused in the guest room at the desk, writing or reading with earplugs in; she had overheard his daily attempts at talking to himself on camera; had seen him with his notebook open watching videos. He continued to eat breakfast and dinner with her every day, but she had stopped asking for updates; she knew he was trying, she knew he wasn't drinking or doing drugs, and she knew he wasn't playing video games.

That Saturday morning, just after breakfast, Tal and his aunt were sitting on the backporch smoking. Aunt Kendra had made pancakes and eggs and bacon, and there had been syrup and orange juice, and Tal was contentedly digesting, when Aunt Kendra abruptly said, "My blood sugar is off, I will be right back."

Tal was amazed. He knew his aunt was diabetic, of course, but it was a condition she never talked about and rather specifically hid; the only partial evidence of her condition on a day-to-day basis was that there were only Sugar Free sodas in the house. This felt significant that she had chosen to share this information, and Tal doubted that she had ever said something similar to another person before.

He put his cigarette out so that he could finish it with her when she came back.

When Kendra returned, she was wearing a ballcap and sunglasses and, in her movement and demeanor, Tal could tell that she had not only taken insulin, but had also had a dose of ethanol.

She sat down, an exaggerately relaxed sitting, took a pack of cigarettes out of her shirt front pocket, withdrew a cigarette, lit it, and said, "Where were we?"

He felt compelled to share.

He said, "Aunt Kendra, can I tell you a shameful secret?"

She waved away smoke and said, "All secrets are shameful, Tal."

Tal leaned forward, "I have a crush on a girl online."

Aunt Kendra was enjoying a little buzz, found this humorous, and asked, "Well? Is she single?"

Tal furrowed his brow and said, "I don't know."

Aunt Kendra leaned her head back, exhaled smoke into the sky.

A robin flew across the yard and perched on the fence.

Tal said, "I'm having trouble with this YouTube thing. It's not working out. I mean, maybe it could work out, but I think it would take too long. I'm going to start looking for a job."

Aunt Kendra arranged one of the unoccupied iron chairs from around the table so that she could put her feet up.

She said, "Do what you need to do."

She paused, looked around at the yard, then said, "But I tell you what, since you're still here, would you mow the yard this weekend?"

Tal looked at the yard. It needed to be mowed.

He said, "Of course."

Aunt Kendra slunk further down in the chair, leaned to the side, and ashed the cigarette in a nearby coffee can on the ground, where butts from the tray were emptied.

"Also," she said, "Would you mind getting groceries? I could make you a list."

Tal said, "I can absolutely get groceries, no problem."

She nodded.

#

That afternoon, Benji came to visit. He took Tal out to eat at a little pub.

They were seated at a booth and Benji said, "I guess I'm paying this time."

Tal gave a defeated nod of his head, and said, "Thanks."

Benji said, "So, have you had enough mooching off Aunt Kendra?"

Tal had nothing to show for his two weeks; all he had were a bunch of bad ideas and a stupid crush, and these were all secrets he would keep from Benji.

He sighed and said, "Yeah. I'm going to start applying to jobs on Monday. I know, I should have already, but-"

Benji interupted him by putting his hand on Tal's shoulder, "It's alright, little brother."

Benji looked Tal in the eye, felt reassured, and asked, "What kind of work were you thinking?"

Tal said, "Probably something book related. I know, I should go back to web development, but I don't think I can do that. And Aunt Kendra doesn't mind if I stay awhile longer, she says so all the time, and if I get a job, I can save for a car, pay rent, whatever, it'll work out. I don't know. Maybe I'll go back to school. I'm not sure."

Benji nodded, "Let me know what you do."

Tal said, "Well, I think I'll start looking to see if the library has any openings."

Benji was uninterested.

Benji said, "You want to see a picture of this gun I'm thinking about buying?"

"Sure," Tal said.

#

The next day, in the late afternoon, Tal mowed the yard while listening to an audiobook. He was having trouble paying attention to the spoken words. He had looked up the local library online and found that there was an open position for a customer service associate. This position was full-time though, and he found this depressing. He didn't want a full-time job. He wanted a part-time job that alleviated the guilt of mooching off his aunt and that made his brother happy. He had considered that there was a big difference between earning zero dollars a week and earning one dollar a week, and that

this difference was the important thing, but that a full-time job that he felt ambivalent about seemed a very steep price for achieving just that.

As his thoughts came to a momentary pause, the book he was listening to came into focus. He was listening to "The Autobiography of Malcolm X", which he had read before. He was on the part where Malcolm had moved to Boston (to live with his aunt, in fact) and where, after having had some free time, he got a job shining shoes at the Roxbury.

Tal finished mowing the yard while Malcolm settled into his new lifestyle.

Tal took a cool shower, contemplated that there was no shame in working, that it was settled, that it was fine, that he would make his way slowly to clarity, even while occupied with a full-time job at the library.

He dried off, changed into comfortable clothes, and sat down to his computer.

"Alright," he told himself, "Fine."

He was going to navigate to the library website and submit an application, but first he would check Twitter.

He loaded his feed, scrolled for a moment, and then saw.

Sammy had a new video out.

He was transported to a certain place: he remembered being seven years old, when he had woken up very early on Christmas morning. Still fully dark, well before dawn, he sat in the chair next to the tree, and sat in awe of the little lights.

A divine stillness.

The presents being evoked before him.

He saw the new video was almost forty minutes long and he wanted to appreciate it as much as possible. Tal went to the living room, found Aunt Kendra watching TV, seeming particularly relaxed.

Tal had less than $200 in his bank account, but he thought this was probably worth it.

"Aunt Kendra," he asked, "Could I borrow you car to run to the gas station?"

She looked up, said, "Sure, go ahead," and she pointed to the bowl near the door with the keys in it.

#

At the gas station, Tal bought the second finest bottle of champagne they offered and a big fountain drink. When he came back to his aunt's house, he dropped the keys in the bowl, and kissed his aunt on the side of the head.

He said, "I'm going to apply to the library tonight, I'm sorry it's taken so long."

Aunt Kendra smiled at him, put her hand on his arm and said, "Tal, you do whatever you need to do."

Tal went to his room, poured a cup of champagne, turned off the lights, and clicked play.

Sammy had an opening skit. She came out wearing a Jedi robe, her face was obscured, and she sat in her chair.

She said, in her smooth, mezzo voice, "The willow submits to the wind. And prospers, until, one day, it is many willows. A wall against the wind. This, is the willow's purpose."

And then she pulled back the hood and smiled.

Tal hit the like button.

"So, I just got back from a survey of the American deserts, where I read *Dune*," she said, "If you can't tell," the video zoomed in on her blue contacts, "Also, I read *Holes*. Also, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. The theme was desert. Right? Desert. What's it mean when a story is taking place in a desert, what's it mean, you know, and, why am I so interested in the desert right now, anyway? Does it have to do with my life? Am I just lonely and desolate and barren and alone? Of course not! I have all my viewers," and she did a fake cackle.

"Oh, this?" she pinched her Jedi robes, "Well, you see, I haven't seen the *Dune* movies, and when I read the book, I imagined the Bene Gesserits as Jedi, so, go fuck yourself!"

Tal swooned. He sunk into his chair.

He had only watched thirteen minutes of the video, which was the portion of the video where she talked about *Dune,* when he was hit by something like a bolt of lightning and had to pause.

He flipped on the lights in his room.

His mind was buzzing again, his thoughts a shifting cloud, not yet coalesced into tight focus, but he knew this much: he would make a video response.

Tal had an opinion on *Dune*, he knew what his opinion was, he knew his opinion was fairly well thought out and that expressing it would respect, but also not submit to, Sammy's point about the spiritual ethos of the book; it took him just under an hour to write a little script, it would just be a video response, it would just be him talking to the camera, with however many cuts for proper pacing, but that was okay. He would start by saying that *Dune* was one of his all-time favorites as a teenager, but that he had re-read it for the first time since that teenager era recently (this was true, about six months before), and his opinion was much different now.

The core point was that, while *Dune* had plenty of good spiritual sounding quotes and that there was a pretty interesting sect of believers in a thing, and that while the story of the book was pretty good, it did not actually function together as a book of cohesive Wisdom, which he had thought when he was younger. He said, for example, if you wanted to create a messiah character, that's not so hard. You don't have to be the Messiah or have a complete Understanding to write a character that looks like the Messiah; you just had to guess what they would say; you just have to ask yourself, like, W-W-J-D? Which was what, on his most recent read, he had noticed. The Bene Gesserit, the Fremen, they had plenty of expressed pieces of wisdom, but that they were interpreted wisdom from other places, and not so much naturally arising as a result of their situations; there was Taoist wisdom in some of the Bene

Gesserit wisdom, which was like Frank Herbert guessing, "What would a Taoist say?"; but that this wisdom was superficial, erzats, because he realized that the actual story did not embody those ideas.

So, while you can find interpretations of wisdom as quotes from the book -- which is easy to do, you could just cite some monk's wise words; you could even re-write them in your own words if you aren't lazy -- the actual book itself contradicts that; why would the Reverend Mother be involved in a plot to produce one superior being, but then espouse the wisdom of all things? The actions and the beliefs do not align.

But was this Frank Herbert's intention? Did it matter at all?

Here he would take a breath.

No. Because the experience of reading *Dune* is not about coming to Wisdom, it's a straightforward book about the Ego, this satisfying power trip we get to live through where the good underdog becomes strong and overtakes the big evil; much of it is centered on defining a good and a bad, and for these things to be subverted later in the series; sure, the book leaves open ideas to be explored later, it's not really so cut and dry like that, but in the main, the growth of the ego in the righteous underdog, that's what makes the book satisfying to read, and that was why he loved it so much as a teenager.

He finished the script by writing, "To be clear, I like *Dune*. But the way I rate books is that most books are Okay, they're readable, they have a fun little story. A Good book, though, has to make a certain impact on the reader and the way they see the world; Great books influence them significantly, add something profound to their lives, and Amazing books permanently change their perspective. *Dune* is okay, it is a fun power fantasy about the repressed underdogs winning, this battle about Good and Evil. It's okay, a fine story. 2/5."

He would record the video tomorrow, he thought, but first, there was more Sammy.

In the rest of the video, she talked less about the books, and more about deserts.

She didn't say it, but Tal thought it was pretty obvious that she was single.

Two-Stars

The next morning, Tal recorded his video. He watched it back and thought it was okay. He knew his points weren't really all that sharp, he understood that he hadn't cited any examples of his points, he knew it was half-baked in a certain way and that he was shooting from the hip; he knew the video was slightly incoherent, but the fact of the matter was that he had recorded a video, that he was uploading that video, and that pretty soon it would be on the internet.

The bigger problem was that, really, it did not *respond* to Sammy's video; it was instead a review that he had posted because Sammy had made a video that included a section about *Dune*.

Somehow, though, that was okay too: the most important thing was that he had made a video.

On their semirural internet, the video took a long time to upload.

As the video was uploading, Tal scrolled through his written reviews and realized that he had a lot of two-star, "Okay", reviews.

"This could be a pretty good gimmick," he thought.

He jotted this down in his notebook and made a list of the two-star books.

He would do his *Harry Potter* review, for example, which he had rated two-stars.

It would become a sort of funny gimmick, right? Because you always knew that, in the end, he was going to give the book a two-star review, that his thought, in the surface sense, would always be the same, two-stars. No tension, that was the humor.

He would review the non-fiction book, *I'm OK - You're OK*, and he would say, "Two-stars."

This made him laugh.

He would review *The Grapes of Wrath*, dealing with Okies, and he would say, "Two-stars, It's ok*ay*".

The ideas were coming. This would happen. He had gained traction now, he would make these videos; he would get better; he would get better at writing scripts, he would get better at editing, and he would get good at networking.

He knew he had it in him.

The video was still uploading.

#

He had lunch with his aunt, a chicken caesar salad, and she could tell he was feeling good.

"Are you that excited?" she asked.

"Yes!" he said.

"For the library job?"

"Oh. No. That's just okay."

She was looking at him expectantly and he continued.

"I wrote my first script last night, and I recorded it this morning, and I'm uploading it to YouTube right now."

Aunt Kendra took a moment to reorient herself to this information.

Then she stood up, smiled, and said, "Congratulations, Tal!"

She hugged him and then asked, "What's next?"

He told her. He had a whole idea for a show. He would review only two-star books, that this would be the gimmick.

In her wisdom, she reflected and then said, "You know what? I think that's an alright idea."

#

While the video finished uploading, Tal filled out an application for the position at the library.

Yes, a full-time job would be horrible now, when he had something that he wanted to be doing with his time, but the actual plan, a secret that he wouldn't tell anyone, was that even though he was sending in applications, he would do his best to not get hired. Maybe eventually he would find a part-time job that he would actually try to get, there would be something out there, and it didn't even have to be related to books or reading or anything. But, in the meantime, this send-in-applications-and-be-surprised-by-rejections plan was a fine approach. It would buy him a few weeks at least.

#

His video finished uploading. He watched it through one more time, and he felt the video was solid. Then, he loaded the YouTube page through a VPN several times so that his *Dune* video showed 17 total views, which felt right. All things set, he went to post a comment on Sammy's video.

Sammy's video had more than 100 comments, and he somehow doubted that his message would get through, but he still posted. He said, "I was inspired to make my own *Dune* review. I was going to do a response video, but, well, there's no response to perfection. Anyway, consider taking a look, huge fan! <3"

Even if Sammy hadn't watched his video, even if she hadn't responded, Tal would have been happy with his efforts. But she did respond. She did watch. That afternoon she commented on the video: "Interesting."

Tal read this and was elated, soaring, but then immediately doubtful: wait, what did she mean? Did she actually watch his video? Or was she just making a comment to be nice?

What was interesting?

He wanted to ask her for more, but he understood this wasn't the thing to do. She had said what she had to say. So, Tal just hit 'Like' and pinned her comment.

#

When Tal was in high school he was, naturally, exploring the limits of his potential, what he could do in the world. When he had sent the letter about the history curriculum, he was probing how society worked in relation to himself. He came to understand then that influencing society was impossible for him in some ways, yes, but that this dynamic of "influencing society" was not the only kind of bounds as regards individual potential. The lesson was not to quit, but to probe elsewhere. So, he found something he was uniquely good at, something he cared about, and something which he thought was worth applying himself to fully.

This was *Counter-Strike*, a competitive video game at the dawn of e-Sports.

He started playing *Counter-Strike* very early in the game's history and quickly found out he was good. At that time, there were no "rated matchmaking" systems; there were community servers where, for the most part, a consistent group of mixed skill-level people played together. And, amongst the one hundred people who regularly played on his favorite server, Tal found himself safely regarded as one of the top three (not only by server stats, but by the frequency of proclaimations by others that he was a cheater). Tal joined up with one of the other top players, they found three more teammates on IRC (#findclan), and then went looking to compete.

They joined the Cyberathlete Amateur League in the open division, "cal-o". Their team made it to the playoffs, easily, in their very first season, and scored enough wins to advance to the intermediate division, "cal-im", in the next season.

For about a year, all of Tal's free time was spent playing *Counter-Strike*: he scrimmaged, he played pick-up games, he watched replays, and he competed. In those times when he needed a break, he posted on *Counter-Strike* forums (which forums, coincidentally, were where he discovered the concepts of "Dutch" and "The Netherlands"). He did the very best he could, his concentration was total.

(In class, he spent an inordinate amount of time drawing layouts of levels on graph paper, of bomb sites, of potential offensive approaches, of grenade strategies, and of ideal defensive angles.)

Their team made the intermediate playoffs two seasons in a row, but both times they did not score enough wins to be invited into the main division, "cal-m".

He and his friend split up and joined different teams. While his friend eventually found success, Tal continued to struggle. He knew he had tried his very best and had suffered personal disappointment for months; he went all in on one final playoffs attempt, even buying Adderall from a friend at school to use during matches, but his new team also failed. Ultimately, the best he ever achieved was a sympathetic bench spot on his friend's cal-m team.

And that was it. That was how good he was. That was how smart he was. That was his potential. That was where he ranked in his estimation of himself as a person. He was above the riff-raff, sure, but he was also one step below the minor leagues; maybe, if he really stuck it out, he could could get a fixed fifth spot on a minor league team but, for the most part, that was it, he was crushed, that was all he would ever be.

Now, though, looking at YouTube, he took his minor league placement as a source of inspiration: if he had made it there in *Counter-Strike*, he was pretty sure he could rank in the minor leagues of YouTube, which would be perfectly acceptable because Sammy, really, was just a minor leaguer herself, and so that was all he needed.

He was confident: he had the dream, he had the idea of how to make it possible, and he had the fire to get it done. And so, over the next six weeks, Tal made videos.

Aunt Kendra was delighted. Tal got the groceries for her, Tal mowed for her. Tal did the dishes, Tal cooked; or, more and more often, Tal would get fast food as she requested. Aunt Kendra's life got very easy and she was pleased. The only thing she ever left the house for herself was vodka (because she wanted the quantity to remain a secret), cigarettes, and her meds; doctor's appointments too, when she had them, but, by and large, she got to sit on the sofa with her feet up and watch TV.

Benji's frustration too had tapered off since Tal had submitted to the importance of his directives; Tal had updated him on his job search, showed him the applications, showed how much work he was putting into achieving this important thing; Tal was always waiting to hear back on this or that, and each rejection he shared made Benji feel immensely more satisfied with his own work; Tal was not just fulfilling Benji in the sense of accepting his mentorship, but was also reminding him of how much Benji he had overcome. He even got a blowjob from the girl at the gas station.

Everyone was happy.

#

In those six weeks since Tal had made his first YouTube video, he had accomplished a lot. He occasionally marvelled at how much you can get done when you're unemployed and deeply motivated; it was so much that it was impossible to keep track of it all.

He had developed a following on Twitter, for example. It wasn't huge, but he knew that he was getting close to the breakthrough point; he had about twenty people who actually read the things he posted, twenty people who always clicked on his videos, twenty people who regularly commented; these were twenty people he had talked to directly, had commented on their similarly amateur videos, on their posts; they were people he had connected with, were "friends" in a certain way. The point was that there were people who liked his two-star reviews; people who knew that when he posted something, like the *Harry Potter* video, that Tal was going to say something interesting.

"The Slytherins are never caught smoking weed in the book, two-stars."

Tal was Tweeting one night when a viewer-friend replied to one of his Tweets. Tal had not explicitly mentioned his video game playing history before, but had made a Tweet that said, "Terry Pratchett's novels have the same vibe as, like, Pubmasters."

(Pubmasters were a *Counter-Strike* team that made humorous videos. They were a pretty good team, roughly on the same level as Tal, but their noteworthy quality was not their Skill, so much as that they were funny. They were very well known in the *Counter-Strike* community, moreso even than many professional teams.)

The viewer-friend had said, "Do you play CS?"

Tal had said, "Nah, but I used to."

The viewer-friend had said, "Respect."

He reflected on this exchange, that there was someone in his group that was enough of a video game person to know *Counter-Strike* (which naturally was a magnitude more intense of a hobby than say, "Mario"), and thought that, for his next video, he would incorporate video game elements. This could even be a recurring thing; Sammy made these poetic expressions of life through book reviews, he felt unable to do that, but maybe he could make joke expressions by taking books and comparing them to games.

He had one review that he knew would fit: *Infinite Jest*. His written review had mentioned that, as he read, he felt like he was watching David Foster Wallace play "Test Your Might", a mini-game in the original *Mortal Kombat*, and he thought that would translate to a pretty good video.

He started the video with an illustration of this idea, where he recorded himself sitting on the floor in front of his TV, wearing a red bandana, while frenetically tapping the button on the controller. A close-up of the TV showed Kano huffing in-and-out intensely in front of a block of stone, while the yellow "power gauge" bar on the left-hand side surged up and down.

"How does *Infinite Jest* stand up? Let's find out!"

Tal had a brief intro, hastily put together, in which Tal sat in various locations reading while Lil Jon's "Read a book, read a book, read a motherf***ing book," played.

Tal explained "Test Your Might": the objective of this mini-game is to tap the button in such a way that the power gauge reaches a certain breakpoint, and then you hit the CHOP button; if the power gauge is high enough, the character will strike the object and it will shatter. If you tap frenetically, as fast as you can (here in the corner was the clip of him in the introduction, wearing the bandana), sometimes the gauge jumps up pretty high and clears the bar, at which point you CHOP, and you break the object. And, with this common strategy, you can break wood, you can break stone, maybe sometimes you can break even steel; Tal recalled a childhood story of about a friend who proclaimed he had broken "ruby" with this strategy, but nobody believed him.

It was not a very easy mini-game, and the successful strategy not particularly intuitive: he showed a clip of his aunt trying to win at the button-tapping game; zooming in on the power gauge bar, never even getting a quarter of the way full, and laughing in frustration.

Tal said the frenetic tapping was how he imagined David Foster Wallace writing *Infinite Jest*, going as fast as he could, as hard as he could, trying so much all the time to REALLY IMPRESS YOU, but that the key, Tal had found, to winning at "Test Your Might" was to establish a rhythm in your tapping, along with a fluid CHOP motion, "Watch."

Tal put on sunglasses, gave a thumbs up, and then, he sat with the controller on his knee, tapped perfectly to fill the bar and digital zoomed in on his ring finger effortlessly hitting CHOP.

He did this sitting in the chair normally. He did this sitting in the chair sideways. He did this standing up. He did this sitting upside down in the chair. And, finally, he did it standing up and turned away from the screen.

He gave the camera another two thumbs up.

He said that, ultimately, while there are great passages and scenes in *Infinite Jest*, like his favorite, the Eschaton game, that easily reached up to the power gauge level of diamond for awhile, that David Foster Wallace never seemed to solve for the rhythm and, as often as the power spiked to diamond, it just as often dropped down to wood. He mentioned also that there were a lot of great scenes that started off wonderful, but went on too long because he didn't CHOP at the right time.

He finished his review by saying, quickly but rhymically, with a slow motion picture-in-picture of the controller being tapped, "I-think-the-editor-and-David-knew-that-the-appeal-of-the-book-was-going-to be-its-length," as a big, red PROLIX crossed the screen, "and-inclusion-of-pointlessly-obscure-words," PROLIX scrolled back in from the other direction, "so-they-didn't-cut-anything-because-if-edited-down-the-book-might-be-better-but-it-would-be-less-noteworthy-and-we-wouldn't-be-reading-it-today."

And then,

"Waste-of-time, two-outta-five,"

"Huh!" Sub-Zero breaks diamond, the video slows, highlighting the blue shards flying through the air.

"Fatality..."

The outro song, same as the intro, began quietly, "Read a book, read a book, read a motherf***ing book."

Tal said, "Hey, thanks for watching. You can check out my real review on Goodreads, link below. You can catch me saying stupid stuff on Twitter, link below. And if you liked this, consider subscribing and stick around for more."

His closest online friend, the one he had originally played *Counter-Strike* with, was the first person to watch and comment. He said, "That's not how Test of Might works, but okay."

And Tal had responded, "lmao".

Gladiator

The *Infinite Jest* video did pretty good. Tal's crew liked it, and he had posted it on Reddit, and he had posted it on Twitter, and by the first morning the video had hit 600 views, which was easily his most successful launch yet.

He was thinking that for his next video he needed to somehow incorporate *Counter-Strike*, and that eventually he would also need to make a video that somehow incorporated *World of Warcraft*. He was thinking that the *Counter-Strike* video would be about satisfying and addictive gameplay, that this was the same fundamental quality of the writing in two-star books, that it was this quality that elevated a rating from one to two; and the *World of Warcraft* video would be about those books where the author chooses to create artificial societies, which choices led to higher rated books, and which choices were meaningless; they were vague ideas that were just starting to form when his aunt, impatient for Tal to arrive at breakfast, knocked on his open bedroom door.

It was not yet nine-thirty, but Tal could see in his aunt's face that she had been fighting a tremendous battle; her face was taut with discontent, but was being subject to unsuccessful waves of chemically induced relaxation.

"Tal," she said, "You want a smoke?"

She offered him a cigarette from the doorway and Tal followed her outside.

She sat down, lit her cigarette, propped her leg up in another chair, and said, "Well, it's going away."

Tal said, "What's going away?"

She pointed with her hand holding the cigarette at her right foot.

She said, "I'm going to be stuck in a fuckin' wheelchair."

She said, leaning over and touching her foot, "It's a weird thing. It's been there all my life. Mostly in shoes, I guess. She used to..."

Aunt Kendra trailed off, seemingly lost in thought. Finally, Tal understood: she had been to the doctor and she was going to have her foot amputated.

Tal said, "Damn. I'm sorry, Aunt Kendra."

She forced a smile, then said, "No, I'm sorry. I just wanted to let you know."

She laughed, there were quiet tears on her face, and she asked, "Do you remember how your grandma used to make pecan pies? I miss her."

Tal said, "Aunt Kendra. It will be alright," and went to hug her.

#

After the smoke, Tal went to his computer and posted on Twitter that his aunt was going through a difficult time and to please keep her in your thoughts.

#

That afternoon, after Tal had got groceries and made a lunch of meatball subs and broccoli, which he had to wake Aunt Kendra from a nap to eat, he went to check his computer, to read and respond to new comments, and was stunned.

There were *seventy-five* new comments. Moreover, "Infinite Jest - 2 Stars (By Tal)" had reached 40,000 views. The thought bubbled up and lingered awhile before presenting itself: what happened?

He checked Twitter, where he had a similar number of notifications, and found out: Sammy had followed him. Sammy had retweeted his video.

Tal had to lay down. His heart was pounding. His ears started ringing. He was having trouble breathing. He was having trouble orienting himself to the objective of acquiring his phone, so that he could call 911, when an image formed in his mind of Sammy. She had laid out a picnic, she was sitting on her knees on a checkerboard blanket beside an open basket, she was wearing sunglasses and she was beckoning him to come and sit.

#

In 2007, during his first semester of college, Tal played a lot of *World of Warcraft* (he hadn't touched *Counter-Strike* in years) and, in particular, he played a lot of *World of Warcraft* during finals week; he sat at his computer that first ever finals week not studying, but playing the competitive mode of *World of Warcraft*.

His three-person team consisted of himself, playing a Hunter, a guy named Peelz, playing a Mage, and a guy named Morekk, playing a Priest. Peelz and Morekk had known each other a long time, were very high rated in two-versus-two, but they had decided to stop playing two-versus-two as they felt they had reached their peak placement in that category and didn't want to risk a series of losses. They had recruited Tal to play three-versus-three to make an additional attempt at "Gladiator".

"Gladiator" was an achievement and title given to players who had been on competitive teams that, at the end of the season, had placed in the top 1% of all rated teams; there was ambiguity here,

however, over what specific ELO rating you needed, because, naturally, the top 1% wouldn't be determined until the season had actually ended; while Peelz and Morekk felt they had got as high in their two-versus-two rating as they were going to get, they could not know if they had *actually* crossed the threshold for "Gladiator", so they wanted to add to their chances by getting a high three-versus-three rating as well.

They had advertised for a third player to form a competitive team and Tal responded.

They knew Tal was a good player, even though his two-versus-two rating was relatively low, because they had "honor grinded" together; they had played countless unranked 10v10 capture-the-flag and countless unranked 15v15 king-of-the-hill games together; Morekk, in particular, knew it was good to see Tal on their team in such a match. They would give it a shot.

They registered as "TEAM BE COOL BABY".

They were good. They were successful.

Their team composition was considered "off meta", which meant that most people they played against did not know how to play against them; while their opponents would have played against dozens of Rogue-Mage-Priest teams, most of them would not have even *seen* a Hunter-Mage-Priest team.

They had cruised to 1900 ELO rating and, during that finals week, pushed to 2150.

They could have gone farther. They probably could have gone much farther, but they would never know, because Tal quit.

He didn't know why he quit, exactly; it was instinctual. If asked, he would say it was something like forfeiting at chess, even when you were in a very winning position, because you just didn't enjoy playing the end game; it was too tedious; the degree of satisfaction was not there; it was one thing to win 65% of your matches and to climb steadily, but it was another to grind out another 40 rating going

51 and 48. It's like, what is it. There's that axiom that says the final 10% takes 90% of the effort, and he didn't want to put in the effort, because 90% was good enough to him.

That's what Tal would have said, but the truth of the matter was that he quit because he didn't want to try his hardest again and then fail. He didn't want to do his absolute best and then find out he wasn't "Gladiator" material. So, indeed, when the season ended and "TEAM BE COOL BABY" failed to reach "Gladiator", instead only reaching "Duelist" (which was the title awarded to the top 5% of teams), Tal was able to say to himself for the rest of his life, "Yeah, I didn't get Gladiator, but I *could* have."

This was his same gut reaction with Sammy; he wanted to cash out right there. If he stopped now, he would be able to say, "She liked me. I *could* have got with a pretty successful YouTuber."

If he stopped now, everything would be just fine.

#

Tal got out of bed, heart still pounding, arms shaking.

He stood over his computer and, with immense effort, and many corrections of typos, composed, then sent, a direct message on Twitter: "Hey! Thank you so much. Do you remember when I commented on your *Twilight* video?"

About ten minutes later, while Tal was laying in bed, still pulsing and rocking and shaking with anxiety, he got a notification on his phone that Sammy had liked his old *Twilight* comment.

She sent him a DM.

She said, "I do remember. I read it. It was cute."

Then she said, "How's your aunt?"

It was like how hurricanes have an eye of the storm; this odd and unreal calm.

Tal got out of bed and looked into the living room. Aunt Kendra was asleep while the TV was playing.

Tal said, "She's pretty relaxed. She's taking a nap and watching TV."

Then he said, "Hey, do you want to voice chat?"

There were a million years that went by. There were new species that came into being and there inumerable species that went extinct. There were a hundred million years that went by. There were Ice Ages; glaciers expanded; glaciers receded; the entire face of the Earth was reshaped. There were a thousand million years that went by. The Earth's atmosphere evaporated and all life went extinct.

She said, "OK."

He called, she answered.

She said, "Hello."

He said, "Hi."

There was a pause: one thousand, one hundred and one million years receded. It was now.

Tal said, "Did you know you're really pretty?"

Sammy said, "Not as pretty as you."

They were both struck. No time passed, the moment was simply frozen.

Tal said, "You know if we were hanging out in the same place, we'd probably kiss right now."

The infinite block of ice went "Poof!" and it began to snow.

Sammy started laughing. She was hysterical. And then she hung up.

Tal was blushing.

Aunt Kendra hollered, "What do you think about getting coneys?"

Tal was mesmerized: the snow was beautiful.

"Tal?" his aunt called.

He had never seen something so beautiful.

"Tal?" she called again, this time sounding a little concerned.

"Hey!" he said, "Sorry. Yes. Let's do coneys."

#

Tal had driven them to a *Sonic Drive-In*. They had just got their coneys and their tator tots. Tal had got a green apple slush, his aunt had got an unsweetened tea. Aunt Kendra was groggy still, her face was a little red. She was taking a pint out of her purse.

She knew Tal saw this and said, "Mind your damn business," but she was really talking to herself.

Tal said, "She asked about you today."

Aunt Kendra was concentrated on spiking her tea when she asked, "Who?"

Tal was so happy that he twisted in his seat.

"Sammy! Sammy asked about you!"

She looked at him, confused.

"Who?" she said.

He was smiling, grinning; it was so overwhelming that Aunt Kendra's mind had no choice but to focus on the thought. She caught on, still looking confused.

She said, "The online girl?"

"Yeah!" Tal said, but he had already shifted his attention to his phone. He was sending Benji a picture: it was the picture of Sammy standing by the cactus; she was wearing a flowing yellow skirt that had little peppers on it, with a red tank top, holding a big sunhat on her head.

Tal sent the picture and then a message, "What do you think?"

His aunt had shifted her attention back to her tea. She paused.

"What do you mean she asked about me?"

Oh.

"She asked how you were doing. I told her you were very relaxed, you were sleeping and watching TV."

Aunt Kendra said, "Well, that's nice,", and took a sip.

Benji sent, "Who is this? Why's she in the desert?"

Tal knew that Benji's major concern would be that you could not fuck someone who lived in another state. As a matter of fact, he knew that Benji found the entire idea of a long distance relationship embarrassing, that it was a thing losers did because they couldn't get something real. The distance was there because they were intolerable in person; if they were not intolerable in person, then they would date someone in person. To share that Sammy was a girl who lived eight hours away would be twice damning from Benji's point of view; it reflected badly on Tal, because he had resorted to distance dating, and it reflected badly on the girl, who had done the same, which again would reflect badly on Tal.

Tal sent, "A girl I been talking to, she just got back from vacation."

Benji was sitting in his truck looking at his phone and considered this. He couldn't tell if Tal was talking bullshit. He couldn't be talking to a girl, because he didn't have a job, because he didn't have a car, and because he was living at Aunt Kendra's house. But, on the other hand, he did send a picture, and he did ask for Benji's opinion; in the past, this had always meant that Benji was expected to meet the girl. So, it wasn't bullshit necessarily.

Benji said, "Where did you meet?"'

Tal said, "We're talking on a dating app."

Ah, thought Benji, well.

#

When Tal and Aunt Kendra got home, Aunt Kendra did not even think to ask Tal if he wanted a cigarette. She just groaned and went to the back porch, while Tal went to his room to plug his phone in.

Sammy sent him another DM.

She said, "What's your next video going to be?"

Tal floated on the idea. There were just the rivers of reality, he was just floating away on the rivers of reality, and he had no idea where it was headed.

He got up to join his aunt on the backporch but halfway there he stopped, spun around, and went back to his phone.

He sent, "I imagine something Romance."

He started to head out of his room and his phone vibrated again.

She said, "What's your favorite romance novel?"

He said, "I'll have to think about it."

And then, finally, he joined Aunt Kendra on the backporch.

Aunt Kendra was not happy. She was not okay. She was not peaceful. She was not relaxed. She was not comfortable in her resignation. She was pissed off; it was absolute bullshit that she would be resigned and still not even be allowed comfort. She was looking at her foot in the chair and she was seething.

The cigarettes were laying on the table and Tal motioned to them, to ask if he could have one, but she didn't seem to register his request.

He sat down.

Aunt Kendra, still seething at her foot, said, "Well, go on then," referring to the cigarettes.

"Thanks," Tal said.

He lit the cigarette, it was hanging out of his mouth, and he thought about the message on his phone.

"You're welcome," his aunt said.

"Aunt Kendra," Tal said, "You know any good romance novels?"

"Do you know when the last time I read a book was, Tal?"

Right.

Aunt Kendra, who had not lit a cigarette yet, said, "Fuck it."

She got up, picked up the ashtray, the pack of cigarettes, and the lighter, and went inside. She left the door open behind her.

This was very, very odd. Somehow, Tal wasn't exactly sure how, this was the most bizarre thing he had ever seen Aunt Kendra do. It was like watching a dog open its mouth and start speaking English. She was going to smoke inside, and she had also left the door open.

Tal saw this as though he were watching a car wreck at an intersection, what is there to do?

The door remained open.

Tal took his just-lit cigarette and placed it on the table. He went inside to his room, noticing that his aunt had gone to her bathroom. He retrieved his partially charged phone, went back outside, and closed the door behind him.

He sat down and sent Sammy a message, "Honestly, I don't know many romance novels. No good idea is coming to mind. What's your next video going to be?"

Sammy said she thought something about Romance would probably be the theme of her next video too, she was thinking about taking a trip to New Orleans. She sent a lot of messages in rapid succession about a certain romance novel that took place in New Orleans.

There was a strong dissonance between the two social conditions Tal found himself in, with Sammy and his aunt, and he felt he needed to separate the two. He opened the backdoor and loudly announced to his aunt that he was going on a walk. She didn't respond; this wasn't personal, none of it was personal, he knew that.

At the end of the deluge of messages about the New Orleans novel, Sammy asked, "What are you doing? Send me a picture."

Tal was just exiting the backyard through the gate. He took a picture of himself. One of his eyes was squinting in the light of the late afternoon sun and the lit cigarette was hanging out of the corner of his mouth. This was a specific "Clint Eastwood" pose that he had mastered long ago.

He sent the picture.

Sammy saw the picture on her phone and thought, "Jesus Christ."

She reacted to the picture with a heart.

She said, "What do you think of New Orleans? Is New Orleans a romantic city?"

Tal said, "Well, it's got that French vibe to it, right?"

"Exactly!" she said.

Just as Tal was stepping onto the road to begin his walk, she sent another message.

It was a selfie; her head was on a pillow, her hair was spread out behind her.

Tal stopped walking. His jaw dropped. He kept his face frozen in this jaw-dropped pose and sent a picture of it.

She responded, "lol", then, "What are you doing?"

Tal said, "I'm on a walk."

"Where are you walking?"

He sent a voice message, "My aunt's neighborhood has a sort of loop to it. It's about a mile. I walk it everyday at least once, but I usually do three."

She said, "Will you show me?"

He said, "Are you going to judge me?"

She said she already had.

Tal took a short video of the street as he walked. The houses had mostly been built in the 1950s, and you could tell. There were lots of houses that had carports and any relatively new car, any car in decent condition really, stood out. This was a bit ugly and made the neighborhood feel decrepit, but at

the same time, all the houses were different, and they had fairly big yards, and there were plenty of big, old trees. So that, also, the neighborhood felt charming.

Tal narrated, "When my parents died, I moved in with my aunt. I lived in this neighborhood for three years before going to college. And then I lived, you know, somewhere else for a few years, and now I'm back here again," he spun the camera around to show his face, and he smiled.

He continued walking, he panned around to show the neighborhood, and he focused on one of his favorite little houses that had a row of little round hedges in front of two thin windows, that three concrete steps up to the front door, that had an ornate iron screendoor.

He said, "It's not like my childhood neighborhood or anything, but it's a fine place to go for a walk," and he finished the video by tossing the cigarette into a storm drain.

He sent the video.

He walked down a street. And then another. He noticed the crickets beginning to chirp; that the insect melody was accompanying the sunset. He heard his footsteps along with the "tir-woo, tir-woo, tir-woo" of the cicadas.

Presently it was dark. He sensed Sammy's absence.

Turning onto the penultimate street of his walk, he paused to send a message.

He said, "Where do you live?"

She immediately responded that she lived in her parent's guest house, then, "One min."

Tal completed the penultimate street and stopped at the corner. He was less than a hundred yards from his aunt's home.

Sammy sent a picture. It was a pretty white building, two stories. The second story had a window that jutted out over a garage. To the left of the garage door there was a door for humans with a frosted glass window; there was a brass lantern to either side of the door, and there were rose bushes that went around the side of the guest house.

Tal completed the walk back to his aunt's, entered the backyard through the gate, and sat at the table. There was something he had just felt, a sort of "snap", but the feeling escaped words; what he thought was, "How did it happen so fast?"

He sent a message, "Sammy, I have to go, but I'll talk to you tomorrow, OK?"

She said, "Okay, I will talk to you tomorrow," and then sent a selfie making a kissy face.

Tal responded with a heart.

He put his phone down on the iron table.

He thought, "Why does it always happen so fast?"

New Orleans

The next day, while Tal was still asleep, Sammy sent him a text, "What do you think about going to New Orleans together?"

When Tal woke up and saw this message he thought of his bank account. There were one-hundred and eighty-one dollars in it. Seeing that Tal had read the message, perhaps sensing this exact concern, Sammy followed up with, "It'll be a business trip. You can be one of the expenses xD."

Three minutes later, before Tal could respond, Sammy called.

"Hey cutie," she said, "Tell me what you're thinking."

Tal said, "I've never been to New Orleans."

She said, "Oh my God. We're going to have to do the whole tour of the French Quarter. We're going to have to do Central Grocery, we're going to have to do Cafe du Monde. We're going to hit it all. Bourbon Street, hurricanes, poboys, the whole thing."

She said, "What's your schedule look like?"

Tal said, "I can make room in my schedule."

#

Aunt Kendra drove Tal to the airport.

She said, "Have a good time, Tal. Have fun while you still can. Call me when you get there."

#

When Tal arrived at the little French Quarter hotel, there was a window that looked into the lobby; he looked through it and saw Sammy sitting at a table. She was wearing a black dress and a black hat. She was wearing sunglasses with red rims. She was looking at her phone.

Tal was amazed. She was smaller, somehow, in real life.

Sammy looked up and saw him standing there, and the enthusiasm shot her to her feet.

She took one moment to orient herself, came onto the sidewalk through the front door of the hotel, and hugged Tal. The hug transitioned into a kiss, and she pulled him through the hotel to her room.

"I needed you so bad," she said.

#

Afterward, Tal laid in the hotel bed with his hands behind his head and watched her pace around the room. She was wearing a sports bra and had put on a pair of black shorts. At that moment, she was putting her hair in a ponytail.

"Okay," she was saying, "Now that that's out of the way," and she stopped.

She looked at Tal.

"Don't you need to have a smoke or something?"

Tal shrugged.

He dressed and left the room.

He sat in the lobby at the little table where Sammy had been sitting earlier. He fingered the key card to the room she had got for him and his mind was empty. There was neither elation nor despair. He

could feel his mind going back to a cache of supressed memories, and he shifted away from contemplation and toward action.

On the taxi ride in from the airport he had seen a little cigar shop. It was a short walk down the street and he thought it would be fun to go pick out a couple cigars.

He sent Sammy a text, "I was thinking of getting some cigars, I saw a cool little shop down the street."

He waited to see if she said anything.

He sent another, "Okay, well, I'll be at the pool."

#

The man in the store sold Tal a collection of four small cigars, cut them for him, and handed them to him in a plastic bag.

The pool was in a courtyard.

Tal picked up an ashtray off a table and approached a reclining pool chair. He arranged all his belongings around the chair just so, his phone to the left, the ashtray to the right, the cigars on his stomach and, just as he was about to strike one of the matches, his phone vibrated.

She said, "More."

#

The second time was a lot more vulgar; there was a lot more verbage, like, "Do you like that I'm a fucking whore?" and "Yeah? Do you like fucking me?"

#

Afterward, again, Tal laid in the hotel bed and watched as she got up, put on her underwear, and started brushing her hair.

"Okay," she said as she brushed, "Cafe du Monde."

Tal asked, "Do you want to split a cigar?"

She froze, the brush in her hair, and looked at him as if he were some stranger accosting her on the street. Tal said, "I got some cigars, but," and Tal saw that Sammy was stopping herself from saying something along the lines of, "Get the fuck out of here."

So, silently, Tal got out of bed, felt her glare at his nakedness. He put on his clothes, took his baggy with the cigars, and left.

#

Tal found himself at the courtyard again, beside the pool, everything arranged.

The sky was overcast but not yet threatening rain.

He laid back and lit the cigar.

From where he was sitting he could see her room; it was on the third floor, and he vaguely wondered what she was doing.

He assumed she was writing. Whether that was taking notes, or journaling, or what form it took in her artistic process, he was unsure. He wondered what she could possibly be writing down. She was taking the first steps of translating her experience into one of her artistic expressions but Tal could not imagine what it was; it certainly was not his experience, his experience failed to hold that sort of weight that made it worth recording, "Pretty girl, horny; the brief satisfaction; the brief meld; the relaxation."

What else was there to say? He had no clue. Did she write that she was moved to tears and needed to be alone? Did she write something about fireworks? Did she write about rain in the desert? What in the world could have been her experience?

The cigar wasn't very good but Tal puffed on it anyway.

There was a very light drizzle. Tal laid the cigar in the ashtray to his right and, to the left, he reached for his phone.

He swiped his unlock pattern and sent a message, "Darling."

She responded, "lol".

He looked at this, put the phone on his chest, and a certain truth came to him: she didn't really need *him* to have this experience. His particular presence was unimportant. He saw himself through her eyes more as an actor playing a part.

Which was okay, really. Which was just fine. Because what else would he be doing? Sitting at Aunt Kendra's house, worrying about finding a job? Dreaming of Sammy, maybe?

This was alright.

He sent her a text, "What are you up to?"

She didn't respond.

That was okay.

#

That night they went out to eat at a restaurant that Tal would have classified as "nice"; a restaurant that was nicer than any clothes he had brought; his blue polo shirt and khaki shorts, his red sneakers; they were just noticably insufficient for the restaurant.

Sammy sat across from him, she was wearing the black dress.

Sammy said, "Do you like oysters?"

Tal said, "I've never had oysters."

She laughed. When the waiter came, Sammy ordered a half-dozen oysters on the half shell.

Tal looked at the situation and saw the potential for this to be a fun thing; it would be a delight, you know, to try raw oyster for the first time, it was like opening a present. But, in this moment, he felt like his experience was being gaped at, you know? He felt like an animal in the zoo. How will he respond to the oysters?

When the oysters arrived, he said, "Sammy," and, what he wanted to say was, "Show me what to do," and he felt that had the potential to be a romantic thing, a fun and tender thing; but the atmosphere wasn't right so the word "Sammy" just hung in the air.

She was wearing the black dress, she was pretty, she was smiling; he was in a nice restaurant; there was a new experience in front of him.

He said, "I just eat the whole thing or?"

She said, "Here", and she picked one up. She said, "We'll do a toast?"

Tal smiled, "Okay," and he picked up an oyster.

Sammy hesitated, then she said, "Um, to the sea," and they slurped.

Tal's mind fumbled to express perhaps the best gastronomical experience he had ever had in his entire life. It was this smooth, salty, zesty burst; it was like, it was like; he thought about a story he had heard on the origins of yogurt, that yogurt, he had heard, had been the inspiration for the food of the gods, what had that food been called?

Sammy was delighted, could see his mind churning to the point of a response.

"Ah!" he said, "Ambrosia!"

She grinned.

Ambrosia. That's what he thought of the oysters.

"Hey," Tal said, "Have you read much Haruki Murakami?"

She offered another oyster, and they cheers'd again.

(Ambrosia!)

"No. Well," she thought for a second, "It's weird that I haven't, I guess."

Tal said, "I always had trouble reviewing Murakami novels, because in one sense they are remarkable, because he does this weird atmosphere, where reading it feels bizarre, it feels really

unique. Like, you read one of his novels, and you experience something new but then, in the same book, on the next page, there will just be some of the stupidest stuff you've ever read."

"Oh, yeah," she said, "The way he describes women, yeah I've heard about that."

She signaled to the last oysters, and Tal, beaming, delighted, slurped the third oyster down.

There was a distinct intuition that Tal had at this moment. He was aware that Sammy was getting horny. He could tell by the way her shoulders moved and the way she shifted in her seat. Somehow, he thought, this time would be a lot more fun, it would be special.

He thought to himself, "Third time's the charm."

He looked forward to it; he looked forward to tending this fire and its ultimate release.

He said, "Sammy. What do you think about doing a video together?"

He looked at her across the table; she was wearing gold earrings, her hair was so smooth; he saw too in her, in that moment the glimpse of the soul he had witnessed in her videos; the catalyst of experience to art.

She looked like an angel.

Tal said, "I love you, Sammy."

She put her hand on his, she looked at him.

She said, "I love you too."

Why didn't he believe it?

Sammy stood up, walked around to Tal's side of the table and spoke softly in his ear, "And I love being fucked by naughty boys."

She put her hand in Tal's lap and kissed him on the cheek.

She said, "Do you know what naughty boys do? They get sucked off in the bathroom, and leave without paying."

#

They walked to Bourbon Street, it was night. They got hurricanes at a small inside-outside bar, they were the only two people sitting outside. They sat on tall chairs.

Tal said, "Tell me about the first time you fell in love."

Sammy said, "It was a guy at my church. He was a swimmer. You wouldn't believe."

Tal laughed, he said, "I've known swimmers."

She said, "He went to a different school, and we only saw each other on Wednesdays nights and Sunday mornings. On Sundays, we would leave the big service, go up to the sort of bell tower. It wasn't exactly a bell tower, but that's the easiest way to imagine it, and we'd make out."

She said, "But, of course, he cheated on me, he got a girlfriend, you know. It was just this sort of kinky church thing, I guess. What about you?"

Tal did not want to share the true story. Somehow, he couldn't. The true story was that his very earliest memories were of being in love; he remembered desperating wanting to get to preschool just so he could to see her again; he remembered always wanting to do what she was doing; if she was playing at the kitchen, he wanted to play at the kitchen; if she was coloring, he wanted to color; he remembered her dark brown eyes and her curly black hair.

Instead, Tal said, "Fourth grade. I was nine years old. Her name was Lauren, and I thought she was the prettiest thing I had ever seen. She was a sort of tomboy. Short hair. She was, how do you say this, you could tell she was kinda country. There was a play that our fourth grade class put on. She went out for the play and so I went out for the play. My mom was so happy because it meant she had to sew a costume for me; anyway, I went up to her one day at practice, I remember this so well, it was in one of the wings off to the side of the stage, do you what I'm talking about? Anyway, I said to her, Lauren, I really like your shoes. And she looked at them, and she said, What? and then I said, I have a crush on you."

Sammy laughed, "What'd she say?"

"She just left."

Tal remembered journaling about Lauren; it had taken him months to get up the courage to tell her that; he wondered if his aunt had his grade school notebooks; he wanted to read what he had said; he knew there would be something about Tarra too, who had been Lauren's best friend, who Tal had also had a crush on the year before. There would be something about Hayley; oh, Hayley! And there would be something about his second grade teacher. He could not even remember them all.

Sammy sipped her hurricane and checked her phone.

Tal said, "I have an earlier one, actually."

Sammy said, "Yeah?"

Tal said, "Yeah, this one was first grade. I actually don't really remember her very much, I guess I can kind of remember sitting next to her one time at lunch. But anyway, the reason I know I was in love was because her name was Courtney, and I remember thinking, over and over again, I'll never forget you, because I'll associate your name with courts. Basketball, tennis. You know."

Sammy was drinking deep.

She finished, then said, "First grade?"

Tal said, "I think so, I think that was first grade."

She said, "Weird."

#

Sammy got drunk fast. Tal had to hold her up while they walked the three blocks back to the hotel. As they got close, she started saying, "Hurry up," and Tal dragged her along quicker.

She said she wasn't going to make it to the room.

She ran through the lobby, into the courtyard, stumbled, and vomitted into the pool.

Tal knelt by her, held her hair.

This went on awhile; she was covered in sweat. Eventually, she said, "I have to get to the room," and here, Sammy having trouble standing and walking, Tal picked her up and carried her to her room, at which point, with immense urgency, she slammed the door behind her.

#

In the morning, Tal knocked on her door. No response.

He paced the hallway. He sent her a text.

He waited an hour. He called. Nothing.

"Are you okay?" he sent, "Let me know you're okay."

In time, she sent a message back, she was at the hospital.

He asked if he could come see her, but she said no, because her parents were there.

#

Tal sat in his hotel room and looked at Twitter; Sammy had posted that she had gone to New Orleans for another video, but that she'd got food poisoning, so it was being put on indefinite hold.

The return flight wasn't for another two days.

Tal went to Cafe du Monde by himself; he had coffee and beignets. It was okay. He went out on Bourbon Street that night and he got a hot dog from a hot dog vendor who was very, very drunk. That was okay.

The last day he called his aunt and told her what happened, she said that he should try to find this poboy shop. She told him to get a crawfish poboy; she told him about a place that her and his dad and their family had gone to when they were young; that he should see if it still existed. He spent a few hours on the internet, sent Aunt Kendra various pictures of places that sold crawfish poboys, and then she called, she said, "That's the one! That's the one. That last one."

Tal walked a few miles, and he had a pretty good crawfish poboy.

He asked Sammy how she was doing and she said she wasn't dying. He asked again if he could come visit her, but she said no, her parents were still there.

That afternoon he got on the plane home.

Not Okay

Aunt Kendra was at the airport when Tal landed. She gave him a hug and said, "I really missed you, Tal."

On the drive, she apologized about being so grumpy the day before he left, that she had been upset with herself the whole time Tal was gone. Tal said he understood, he didn't blame her.

But still, when they got home, she took her spot on the sofa and lit a cigarette.

She asked, "You want a smoke?"

#

Tal sent Sammy a text asking how she was. She didn't respond. He called her. She didn't answer. He left a message. She didn't call back.

Tal looked over his YouTube videos.

The *Infinite Jest* video was at 130,000 views. There were a lot of angry comments now; the newer the comments, the angrier they got; people disagreed with him, they watched his video because they hated him; they cited great passages and called him an illiterate moron.

Tal thought, "These people aren't enjoying this," so he deleted the video.

Then he deleted all his videos.

Then he looked at Sammy's Twitter page, and he deleted his Twitter account.

Finally, he deleted her phone number and, immediately, he missed her.

Now came the unbridled thoughts. The feelings uncurled in his stomach and made him sick. They had been there since the first day Sammy and Tal had talked. He knew. Of course he knew. This was a lesson that was branded on his soul.

In college, Tal had dated an intelligent and beautiful woman. They became serious and passionate in the enthusiastic manner of youth -- they would spend eternity together, they knew -- but then they did not know. There were all the stumblings and doubts. She got pregnant, but had an abortion. Tal was failing his classes and he dropped out. They had to break up, it was not going to work, she was too good for him, he said. But then he had wormed his way back into dating her again after he started community college. Tal broke up with her a second time, she was going away on a summer internship, he would not be a burden on her, he said. But when she returned there he was, once again, trying to get her back.

She had sat across from him in the Mexican restaurant and said, "You don't want me, Tal. You only want what you can't have."

Which was the exact same disconcerting truth he had recognized on that first night after talking with Sammy. He had the thing and in place of the immense hope and drive and fantasy there was nothing. He had sat there in the dark in the backyard for a long time, hoping for a feeling; he had gone to New Orleans hoping for a feeling; but he already knew the truth: he had it and so the dream was gone. It happened so damn fast.

When his college girlfriend told him that he acknowledged that it was true, at least in a certain sense. Then, he was thinking of it in this sense of youth, in the context of this sort "conqueror" era he

was going through in his life. He felt everyone went through this phase, maybe it was youth itself, where a person has to explore the extent of their capacity to interact with the world: they go out, they find something that seems impossible, and they attempt to make that thing real; if they accomplish it, great, they move on to something else, if they don't, they set their sights a little lower; they repeat this until, at last, they have determined who they are and what their relationship is with the universe. At that moment in the restaurant, in his attempt to win her back a second time, Tal was honing his understanding of what he was and was not capable of; of course he only wanted what he assumed he couldn't have, how else would he learn who he was?

But, as the years would pass, he would realize she had been right in a more general sense, that it was a more universal statement about desire itself. The ultimate tautological truth was, simply, that you do not want what you have. He would remember when this tautology became obvious: he would read Socrate's treatise on sages and philosophy; "Love is that which lacks the object it seeks," Socrates said, so the sage, therefore, having attained knowledge, is no longer in a state of love with regards to knowledge.

This statement that Tal only wanted what he could not have was so fundamental to him that it would be his very last thought before he died. He would be laying in a hammock at night, the stars overhead, his breathing becoming increasingly labored. He would realize his death was imminent and, though he had been at peace for many years, he would see himself in that moment wishing for just a little more time alive and, thinking that, that he only wanted what he could not have, it would make him laugh, which would make him cough, and he would breathe no more.

#

Tal thought that losing Sammy was not, in itself, so bad. He was a little sad and a little hurt that she hadn't called or texted back. He did not think it was losing the dream of Sammy either that was the

worst part, though that too was pretty bad. There was something behind it all that was much more massive.

Tal was laying in bed, listening to music, contemplating this, when he got a text from Benji.

Benji said, "How'd the trip go?"

Tal said, "It was okay."

Benji sent three question marks.

Tal said, "Got it in, I guess."

Benji sent a salute emoji.

The acute pain was sharper then. The dream, in relief, presented itself.

They were supposed to have had this magical experience. They were supposed to have fallen hopelessly in love; they were supposed to have been carried off into the future by the intensity of this wave. There was supposed to have been a certainty to last the rest of their lives; a bonafide magic that led to them getting married and living out the rest of their lives together as these weird artists, the wave and magic of which Sammy was meant to capture for them to remember forever in her New Orleans video.

But that hadn't happened.

He saw her in the restaurant with her earrings in, remembered how he had thought she looked like an angel. He tasted the sweetness of that moment, the preciousness of dining on ambrosia with a goddess -- that was the last glimpse. It was the last glimpse not only of the dream of Sammy, but the last glimpse of any dream.

That was the truly massive sadness, and it hit in his stomach: there were no more dreams of angels, there were no more dreams of Gods, there were no more dreams at all.

Tal said, "We broke up, though."

Benji, laying on his sofa in his living room, with his kids sitting right beneath him, laughed hard.

His son looked up and said, "What, dad?"

Benji said aloud, "Tal is a funny guy," then sent a text, "Your dick that bad, huh?"

Tal said, "I guess so."

Benji said, "Are you alright?"

Tal, laying in bed, sighed.

"You know what you need?" his brother asked.

Tal responded, "Yeah. A job."

Benji laughed aloud again, he sent, "I love you, little brother. But no, I'll come by tomorrow, we'll get a drink. Last time I'm paying."

Tal said, "Ok."

He laid in bed. He looked at his computer.

He missed that too. He missed when computers were magical. He missed when *World of Warcraft* was magical; he missed when *Counter-Strike* was magical; he missed when sex for itself was magical. He missed when airport terminals were magical; driving, going on trips, riding bikes. He missed when kissing was magical. Fireworks. Christmas lights. Jelly beans. The mall.

He missed all the angels he had ever had in his life.

#

The next day, when Benji took him out to the pub, Tal was a little more open about the story with Sammy. He told Benji that she had been this semi-famous person, that he had been making YouTube videos, the whole thing.

Benji was, surprisingly, impressed. He was also optimistic.

"Tal, that's quite a story. I gotta piss."

As Benji stood at the urinal, the emotions and thoughts began to coalesce and he thought he was on the verge of understanding. He saw it himself: his little brother had still had dreams, and, still having these things, he had felt the need to chase after them. That was okay, that was fine. Benji remembered wanting to race motorcycles; he remembered the thrill when he got his own liter bike; but how, after some time, he was able to put it behind him. This motorcycle racing was not a purpose. A sort of hobby, maybe, but not a purpose. Benji had processed these things earlier in life than Tal, but that was to be expected, Benji was the older son, he was more driven, more motivated, the more, what was he? Bold. He was the bolder one, the more assertive one, and so he had gone after his dreams like a cheetah after an antelope, while Tal, the younger, had just sort of bobbed along.

That was okay. He understood.

As Benji zipped up his fly and and washed his hands, he developed very tender feelings; he had a very clear view now, he understood.

His brother had lost everything; not just dreams, but everything; he had lost his car, his job, his girlfriend, his savings. God, that had to suck. And then he had tried to find a way to feel better about himself, reorient himself toward something bigger one more time and, well, that hadn't worked out either.

When Benji left the restroom, he saw Tal sitting at the booth.

He could feel how sad Tal was, he truly had a tender spot for his brother, and he felt bad for how mean he had been earlier in the summer.

He thought, "It's alright, little brother, we all go through this."

Benji went to the bar, to the bartender, and said, "Could I get two Blue Moons and um," he motioned over to the table where the miserable Tal was sitting, "Could you keep 'em coming?", and he offered a one-hundred dollar bill.

The bartender said, "Sure thing," and Benji said, "Thanks."

Benji sat down in the booth across from Tal and slid him his beer.

Benji said, "Drink up."

Tal sighed, "Thanks."

There would be a reorienting, Benji knew. There would be a settling. Things would be okay. Tal would grow up; this was growing up. But growing up didn't mean there wouldn't be fun any more.

Benji recalled to Tal various fun things that had happened in their life.

"Do you remember when Dad got that little motorcycle? The monkey bike?"

Tal laughed, "Yeah."

"He was so big and the bike was so small."

There were still good things in life.

Tal offered one, "Do you remember the summer you came back from college, and you were playing *Counter-Strike*? And I sat behind you on a bar stool and watched you play?"

Benji did not remember this.

"And I begged you to play? And I told mom, and mom said you had to let me play."

Benji was thinking.

"And then you let me play, and I bought an m249 and died immediately."

Benji couldn't remember that.

"You were upset."

Tal thought it was weird that his brother had introduced him to Counter-Strike but he couldn't remember ever playing with him.

Benji said, "You remember Andrea?"

Tal did not want to remember anyone.

When the food came, he didn't want to eat either. And after only three beers, he was done.

Well, thought Benji, it wasn't that easy, he knew.

"Come on," Benji said, "And hey, I got something in the truck."

Tal sat in the passenger side of the truck, and Benji pulled out a wooden dugout.

"Hm?" he said.

Tal said, "I don't have a job."

"Ah," Benji said, "Don't worry about it. Look, I'll have you come do some work for me; you can go on some jobs with me. Just a couple weeks. You'll get some money, we'll do it under the table. You'll start to feel better. Don't you miss having money?"

Tal wondered at this and realized that, in fact, he had not missed having money at all. There had not been a single thing that he wanted money for since his aunt had been covering the basics of living.

Benji said, "Life can be depressing, I get that, dude. But life can be fun too. You got to have fun, man. Like old times," and Benji offered the loaded one-hitter to Tal.

Tal said, "You can pee clean in a week, anyway. It would take longer than that to get a response."

Tal lit the one-hitter, inhaled, and passed it back to Benji.

Benji blew through the pipe so that the ash was ejected out the truck window.

Tal exhaled.

They drove and listened to music. Tal felt kind of okay. Not good, but kind of okay.

#

When Benji dropped Tal off at Aunt Kendra's house, he said, "Remember: try to have some fun, then get back out there. That what's it about. You make money so you can have fun. You don't have to like your work; you make money so that you afford things you want to do."

"I know, Benji. Thanks"

As he stood in front of the door to Aunt Kendra's house, Tal thought that was the problem he started with: he did not want to do anything.

He rang the doorbell. Aunt Kendra had fallen asleep on the sofa.

She woke up and let him in, then hobbled to bed.

Tal looked over the living room; there were the cigarettes, there was his aunt's bottle.

He sighed. So that was it, then? He would just live the same life that Benji and his aunt were living? This resigned thing. Just slowly get old, disintegrate, and die?

He went to the pack of smokes on the little table, the handle of vodka on the floor.

No, he thought, that was not his escape. He would read.

Trapped

Tal had not read a book since moving into his aunt's house. He wondered about that, but he supposed there had not been enough space; there were these pressing concerns and dreams to chase, but now he had all the time in the world.

He made a few attempts at fiction that he had been meaning to get around to for a long time. He started with Great Russian Literature, but soon remembered why he had never read any of these books: he did not know how to pronounce Russian names. Audiobooks were an option, but he did not want to read audiobooks of, say, Doestoyesky, because he would want to reflect on the passages.

He tried reading some popular books, but the implicit motivation in most of those stories made him feel lonely. How was he supposed to care about some guy fighting for justice when he knew that was a silly, fruitless pursuit? How was he supposed to care about some fantasy where the person set out to achieve glory, or love, when he knew that it was never ultimately satisfying in the end?

Eventually, he decided to crack open the Bible, and he read the gospels, which he found mostly disappointing. Then, in his glut of time, he tried the Ghagavhad Gita.

This was an interesting step in the right direction.

He read the *Autobiography of a Yogi*, but quit when the author started talking nonsense. He read the *Power of Now*, but quit when the author started talking nonsense. Then he read *You Are Here* by Thich Nhat Hanh. This book made sense and, as far as he could tell, contained no nonsense at all.

Inspired, he read books on meditation, and soon fell into a solid daily rhythm.

He woke up and began the day by sitting. Then he made breakfast for his aunt, which was always some variation of eggs and meat; this breakfast of eggs and meat was the only thing Tal thought his aunt seemed to enjoy and, moreover, was the only thing that fit her doctor's requests for her diet. So, the morning was always good.

Next, he would tend to the house; he would do the dishes, or he would mow the lawn, or he would go shopping, or he would pick up his aunt's medicine; whatever needed to be done.

Then he would make lunch.

After lunch, he would do a guided loving-kindness meditation.

After that, he would read.

After reading, he would make dinner.

After that, he would take a long walk.

After walking, he would go to sleep, and then he would wake up and do it all over again.

#

After a few weeks of reading and meditation, life started to feel better. He had got ahold of a new direction: to develop insights. Insights became little targets that he came across from reading: he would first understand a set of ideas, for example, that greed is the desire for more good, that hatred is the desire for less bad, and that greed and hatred were the cause of suffering. Then, with meditation, he gained the ability to not just understand these things conceptually, but to be witness their truth in his life.

He saw, for example, that he had been greedy for a sense of personal significance and that, because of that greed, he failed to appreciate the good he did for his aunt. He saw clearly how much he had relieved her loneliness, how she had never before let anyone know about her drinking, or her frustration over her health, and how letting that out was a massive relief for her.

While the pieces often came together well, other times Tal got frustrated.

There was, for example, in many different systems of understanding, a lot of talk about goodness and badness defining each other and that, therefore, they were actually one thing. This made some sense: inside exists because outside exists, they define and exist only in relation to one another, but how does that make them one thing? Are there not still the two things? Is there not still inside and outside? If bad is one side of the coin, and good the other side, sure, there is only the one coin, but are there not still two sides? Because these ideas came up so often, he felt they were meant to be hugely important, but he failed to see any importance in them at all.

Another set of concepts he struggled with the relationship between equanimity and compassion. If you were to accept all things as they are, which is to say, practice equanimity, then how did compassion ever come into play? Compassion was, as he understood it, the desire (and capacity) to relieve suffering; if you desired to relieve suffering, how was that any different than hatred? Was that not hatred of suffering?

Even so, he never found these sets of ideas worth discarding completely and the insights came frequently enough that life remained, on the whole, interesting.

#

One day, Tal was doing his morning sitting and his distaste for the concept of "making money" arose. He let it sit there. There was a realization. Making money, he realized, was a euphemism for attaining power. He saw his deep hatred for this idea of money as social power because he would have

preferred intellect or kindness to be the source of social power and that, because he had held on to this particular hatred, he had become an isolated, lonely ascetic.

That morning he made breakfast for his aunt and watched her eat. He witnessed that, though it had once been her favorite thing, being served fried eggs and ham, she did not connect with or enjoy the food any more. And, that afternoon, when she woke up from her drunken nap, and yelled for Tal that he needed to get cigarettes, he realized that he was not offering her any relief from her loneliness either, because she had stopped seeing him as a distinct person.

Tal laid in bed that night and knew the time to leave had come.

Tal set aside two hours in the afternoons to work on his resume, his portfolio, and within a week he was sending out resumes.

In another week, he got an email asking to schedule an interview.

#

Tal was looking forward to sharing this news with his aunt. He knew that it would be somewhat disappointing for her, but he also knew that she wanted the best for him. Tal had got fast food chicken sandwiches that night, which was his aunt's favorite fast food meal.

As she was unpacking the bag, Tal said, "Aunt Kendra, guess what?"

She said, "What?"

Tal said, "I've got an interview on Friday, it's for a little web development company," and he told her it was located across town in another suburb.

Aunt Kendra said, "How's that going to work?"

Tal said, "What do you mean?"

Aunt Kendra became condescending, insulting, "Well. Do you expect me to drive you to work everyday, and then for me to drive home? And then for me to also come and pick you up? And then for

me to also drive you home again? Or were you thinking you would just take my car? And leave me stranded all day?"

Arguments, theoretical solutions, to this problem popped up in Tal's mind immediately: that the situation would only be temporary, that after just a month or two he would be able to get his own car, that if she would let him borrow some money he could take Ubers instead, but he knew offering solutions was futile; if she had wanted to help, she would have.

Tal thought.

He said, "I didn't think about that, I'm sorry."

So, Tal began to apply to closer jobs; there was a cashier position at the nearby gas station, but they did not respond, he thought it was possible they didn't want a guy with all this programming experience but no other sort of work history. There was another job, working at a Dollar General, where he got an interview, but he thought his presence seemed insulting to the manager.

Over two weeks, Tal had earnestly applied to every single job that he could find which he could either walk or ride a bike too and he discovered that he was stuck. To a degree, it was painful to realize that he could not get a job working at a gas station or a Dollar General, or the nearby fast food restaurant, or at Wal-Mart (which had been a stretch of distance), but to realize he was trapped was truly crushing.

Tal called Benji, he asked Benji if there was anyway he could help him out with a car. Benji told Tal that he had to learn to get by on his own, that he should not expect handouts, that he had gotten soft from living with Aunt Kendra and that, frankly, he was truly disappointed and embarrassed that Tal would even ask. Tal asked Benji if he could work for him, to pay off a car, and Benji told him the same thing that Aunt Kendra had said, did Tal expect Benji to let him live with him? Or was Benji supposed to drive an hour and a half there every day to pick him up and then an hour and a half home? Benji had no desire to be stuck taking care of Tal like Aunt Kendra had been stuck with him.

Tal looked into working as a freelancer, but the only work he was able to find online were jobs in which he was competing against the whole world; and, besides that, he simply lacked expertise to make it work. He even briefly considered going back to YouTube, but it was an unserious thought; it would be a long time before he was able to make enough money to buy a car from YouTube revenue, and, anyway, he lacked the passion to make good videos.

He was stuck.

So, he continued to read, and he continued to meditate, and he continued to take care of his aunt, and he continued his night walks, and he continued to have little insights until, eventually, the summer had passed and it had turned to autumn.

Aunt Kendra Dies

Aunt Kendra's surgery, which had happened near the end of the summer, had gone fine; her right leg had been amputated below the knee. The doctor said she needed to do a better job of eating right, needed to take better care of herself, that she needed to take her condition seriously. That she needed to stop drinking, that she needed to stop smoking, that she needed to avoid carbs, but Aunt Kendra did not care. If the whole point of the diet and lifestyle changes were to keep her alive, but the only thing keeping her alive were her lifestyle choices, then what was the point?

Tal continued to take care of her; he cooked the good breakfasts for her; he mowed the lawn one last time in early October, he went to the liqour store, he picked up her medicine, he bought groceries and toilet paper and he did the laundry.

She got used to the wheelchair, which was supposed to be temporary. There were other options, but she didn't care.

The afternoons were the most depressing for Tal, because every afternoon Aunt Kendra would wake up irrated and angry, and Tal would have to get dinner, and dinner was never worth eating, in her opinion, no matter what it was.

On one of those autumn evenings, Tal had set out for his usual walk.

He had previously had an insight that resolved the equanimity-compassion paradox, which was that, when you exercised equanimity and encountered suffering, then compassion naturally arose; compassion was simply a form that equanimity took; the principle of equanimity and acceptance of all things also meant accepting the compassion and motivation that arose within yourself.

So, Tal knew that his aunt resented it when he went on walks, but he exercised equanimity. Here, equanimity took on a form of a complicated compassion: there was compassion for his aunt's suffering, this hatred that arose to see Tal able to go on a nice evening walk, but there was also compassion for his own suffering; that he needed this time to be free and feel relaxed, to see the sky, to breathe the fresh air, to be out of the smoky house and away from the font of incurable misery. This intuitive blend of compassion led to his understanding that although it would make his aunt unhappy, in a certain sense, his not going would not necessarily make her happy, whereas, for himself, going on a walk would relieve a good deal of his own suffering.

On that mid autumn walk, he was deeply moved by the beauty of the neighborhood. There was a golden sunset which shone through the trees and illuminated thousands of silvery spider webs; these webs that had been cast from everywhere, trees, bushes, houses, lampposts, mailboxes, cars, dangled and blew and shone in the wind. It was one of the prettiest things he had ever seen; the gold and silver, the life that had cast them and discarded them; so that, when he found himself walking the final street back to his aunt's house he was filled with an incredible sense of beauty. He looked at each house he passed and wondered that, yes, he was trapped and powerless and that, in a certain sense, he could see himself amongst the absolute of bottom of people in terms of social success, of social power, that each

of these people in their houses had so many magnitudes more agency than he did; that they were able to own homes and drive cars and go out and do hobbies with friends. Yes, it was true that, in comparison with them in this way, he was at the very bottom; he had no money, he had no hope of being able to make money; he had a brother who loathed his existence, and he had an unavoidable aunt who overflowed with misery; but, at the same time, he thought about how he was able to appreciate the beauty in those spider webs, that he had witnessed their glory, and he thought, even though he was powerless, there was no way any of those people in their houses, with their cars and friends and such, could be too much happier than he was.

When Tal entered the house, his aunt immediately began yelling, "You son of a bitch, you asshole," she was laying on the floor. She had fallen trying to get into her wheelchair from the couch, and she had been laying on the ground for some time.

Aunt Kendra was not particularly heavy but she was drunk and angry and helping her was a struggle. Finally in her wheelchair, with disgust and hatred, she told Tal just to get to her bed.

Tal pushed her to her bed, she rolled out of her wheelchair, and she immediately vomitted. She made some futile attempts to clean it off, and then fell into a drunk sleep.

Tal looked at her covered in vomit with immense pity. He went in her bathroom to get towels; he very, very rarely had been in his aunt's bathroom, and he saw there, with an immense frown, on the bathroom counter, that his aunt had taken out her .38 revolver and that it had been loaded.

His frown was deep and would not leave.

He took an armful of towels out of her cupboard and stood near her bed.

She was sleeping, her leg was missing, and her face and chest, and the bed all around her, was covered in vomit.

He sat in his aunt's desk chair.

He didn't think there was anything more sad in the world.

She had been so nice to him, all his life. She had brought him in when his parents had died. She had taken care of him when he had nowhere else to go. When he had stupid dreams, she had supported him in chasing them. At all the worst times in his life, she had been there to hold him and make sure he was okay.

Life had been deeply unfair to Aunt Kendra.

Tears welled up in his eyes and he looked away, her desk coming into his vision.

She had kept a diary, he knew about this, and it was sitting there; she had been active in filling her diaries, Tal knew this, but when he opened it and flipped toward the end, he found that she had stopped writing. The last entry had been dated September 9th and it had only said, "I wish God would take me."

Tal closed the diary.

He went to his aunt and said, quietly, "Aunt Kendra, let me help clean you up, alright?"

She mumbled, drunkenly, and Tal did his best. He knew he wouldn't be able to change her clothes or her bedsheets, but he did his best.

He said, "I'm going to get you a glass of water, alright? I'll leave it here on your bedside table."

She didn't notice.

He left her room and turned off the light.

Later that night, Tal heard a gunshot.

Drugs, Then

When Aunt Kendra died, one of Tal's far-away cousins inherited her possessions: the house, the car, and so forth. But, this cousin understood that Tal was in a hard situation and he offered aunt's car to him, which he hadn't wanted to go through the trouble of selling, anyway.

Benji let Tal stay with him at his ranch for ten days, and in those ten days Tal found a job working as a janitor at a big church back in the city. After he got his first paycheck, Benji helped Tal with a deposit on an apartment.

Tal worked, he drank, and he played video games.

He talked a lot to his oldest online friend. His friend was concerned with Tal's drinking and his return to obsessive gaming, and he suggested he needed to do some healing.

"MDMA," he said, "then LSD."

Tal had never done any drugs aside from weed, he didn't know where to get MDMA, he didn't know where to get LSD.

His friend asked if he knew how to use PGP.

Tal, despite once being an enthusiastic autodidact of arcane computer technology, had never spent much time learning about the specifics of encryption and, as such, did not know how to use PGP.

His friend sent him a guide. His friend told him to make a new email address.

Tal made a new email account and his friend sent him an encrypted email.

The email detailed the steps for buying drugs online.

It was easy.

It was incredibly easy in fact, and after a little anxiety about the entire idea, about the immense illegality of it all, he tried it. He bought an eighth of an ounce of marijuana and the marijuana arrived in the mail a week later. He did it again, and again, and again, and soon he never concerned himself with the immense danger and illegality of the act; his only concern was that he always had weed so that he could smoke it every day before work, so that he could smoke it every night at work, and so that he could smoke it every morning at home after work.

#

Tal's janitor routine started the same way every night. He clocked in and then went to the janitor's closet to stock. He filled a big bag with clean rags from the laundry and tied it to the handle. He filled the mop bucket and attached a mop head to the mop. He check his spray bottles, loaded them with any chemicals that were low. The last item on the cart he stocked was the toilet paper and paper towels. After his cart was stocked, he dragged it and the vacuum to the first major entryway of the church, and, all things set, he went for his first break.

One night, unbeknownst to Tal, the choir director had come in to complete some work, but was sitting in his car still finishing a phone call with the pastor on the details of the situation, when he saw Tal walk out through the main doors, go to his car, and, once inside, saw him light up a joint.

Tal was fired.

Within a week, Tal found a job in the kitchen of a restaurant, which he had chosen because he knew he wouldn't be drug tested.

Here things stabilized for awhile.

His drug use, up to this point, had been fairly limited. He had tried MDMA a couple times, by himself, which he would characterize as "very painful, emotionally", and he had taken Adderall a few times when gaming, and he had dabbled in other pharmaceuticals: Xanax, Valium, Ambien, just for fun, but he had never got into any of the "hard drugs".

One evening, after closing, Tal was standing outside with another one of the cooks and a couple waitresses passing a blunt between themselves. One of the waitresses had just checked her phone, and she had said, "It's a helluva bitch finding coke," and Tal had thought, "I can find coke."

That evening he ordered cocaine and it arrived a week later. He offered it to the waitress and she said it was the best she had ever had.

Tal tried the drug himself and found it underwhelming compared to his expectations from seeing how it was portrayed in movies and TV shows and the like. His primary thought in regards to cocaine was that its portrayal was racist in a way because, in his opinion, it wasn't any better than Adderall. That while Adderall usage was normalized as an okay thing for any middle class person to safely give to their children, cocaine was demonized as the primary fuel of "superpredators". Tal felt that "hard drugs" had been misrepresented.

Tal and the waitress became an unofficial item; they had plenty of sex, and soon they had a little side business going. Tal got it, she sold it. They weren't getting rich: Tal spent a thousand a month, and she came back with a little under two thousand. When Tal was not at work, or not having sex with the waitress, he played *World of Warcraft.* He joined a competitive group that raided five nights a week; his income was twice his expenses.

He made money, he did drugs, he had sex, and he played video games.

This went on for eight months. Then, one day, he got his pack, an ounce of cocaine, and he met up with Bella in a 7-11 parking lot. He handed her the pack and she kissed him on the cheek.

And he never saw her again.

He was empty.

He looked up Sammy's videos, sent her a message and she blocked him.

The pain was immense.

What he decided to do finally, which he had considered a few times before, was to go ahead and try heroin. What else was there?

Heroin, he had discovered, was pretty inexpensive.

He had considered percocets, or hydrocodones, or oxies, or any of the other pills before, when he was dabbling in pharmaceuticals, but these pills were very expensive. And, not only were they expensive, they were often fake, and which opiate that they had been made with was impossible to know. Heroin, in a funny way, was both safer and cheaper. He found a good source, got a gram pack one day, and started to snort.

Tal was pleased with the heroin on account of the fact that he didn't like it very much, in a similar way that he didn't really like cocaine; he liked the heroin more, though, because it was so chill, and so he made a little habit of treating himself to a thing that he enjoyed by snorting the skinny lines of brown powder after work on those nights when his raid team was doing trivial encounters.

He worked at the restaurant for another four months. He made friends with a new cook; he got this cook and her lesbian girlfriend psychedelics; they sold MDMA, they sold LSD, and they sold DMT; and, after work, Tal went home and snorted heroin.

After a particularly busy night at the restaurant, Tal went home to his little apartment and snorted more than normal, enough that he was unable to focus on playing any games, enough that he completely missed logging in for the raid at all and, as he drifted off into that odd dream space, where

his only concerns were the odd thoughts, he had a detached understanding, and deep remembrance, that this experience was not something he actually enjoyed. He saw how he had found it okay to use specifically because he didn't like it all that much and after that night, where he blew off the raid to lay in bed, he thought he should quit using heroin.

But he couldn't.

As soon as he ran out he would have intense fantasies, overpowering dreams that felt extremely real which told him that, actually, heroin *is* that good, it's so good that it's the only thing that matters. It wasn't so much that he felt dopesick, which never became that big of a problem for him, but that he knew, even though he knew he was wrong to know it, that the high on H was the only truly satisfying thing in the world.

Heroin echoes; the highest and clearest sign of how it was: he dreamed Sammy, he dreamed Heroin; he knew their promises were false, he knew that, but they were so convincing.

He saw this play out for a few weeks. Each time he tried to quit he would come back, and he would be disappointed, so he would use more; and then he would run out, and have that false wisdom about the best thing, and again he would be disappointed, and so would do more; and one night he realized that his life was over, there was nothing left.

He called Benji, told him that he was going to kill himself, and Benji called the police.

Psych Unit

Tal stayed on the psych unit for twenty-seven days.

The first week was bad. Detox was bad. Losing his job was bad. Getting behind in rent was bad. He was irate. He lost his temper, and he was an asshole to staff.

The second week was less bad, but it was still bad.

There was not much to do on the psych unit. There were groups during the day, they talked about coping skills or emotions or whatever. There were meals; they were the same trays they served in jail, several patients had said. He talked with a doctor twice a week and he talked with a case manager twice a week. For the rest of the time, he could make phone calls at the nurse's station or he could color or draw or journal or watch TV in the dayroom. But, for the most part, Tal opted to lay in bed and think about dying.

Tal felt he held the normal opinion on death. Tal thought everybody pretty much believed the same thing: that there is nothing and then you are born and you live, during which time there is something, and then you die and, in death, you return to nothing. His opinion on people like his aunt who said they believed in an afterlife was that they did not actually believe in an afterlife so much as

they wanted to believe; this desire to believe was what they called called faith. Aunt Kendra had once had faith in the afterlife, so that believing in the eternal afterlife made this life important in context, but that, over time, she had lost the self-deception, had lost faith, and then she was in despair because this life then was pointless. Tal had never had faith at all, he thought the self-lie quality of faith was so evident that it would never work for him; the difference between him and a believer, he thought, was that he accepted what he truly believed, that death would be the obliteration of all things and the return to nothingness, while they sought to hide from this uncomfortable truth.

The return to nothingness was what Tal hoped to achieve by killing himself.

He told the doctor as much. He told her about his life, told her he had done it all; that he had once been successful in the normal sense, that he'd had a good job, and a girlfriend that was willing to get married and have kids. But he had not found that idea fulfilling, and that he had not wanted to waste his life's potential on something he was uncertain about. He told her about his journey as a sort of artist; he told her about Sammy. He said in getting with Sammy he had done the most incredible thing he could imagine doing. He said he had long ago reached his potential, knew what it was, knew it was unsatisfying, and that there were no more dreams to explore. He told the doctor that was why he had started using drugs, that if he did not have any dreams then at least he could live a life of escapist pleasure and that, would you believe it? Drugs weren't the solution either.

"There's nothing left for me to do," he said, "There's nothing left for me to try. It's just this endless miserable grind and I've had enough."

She sat and listened.

Tal said, "It's like a game, you know. Have you ever played pokemon?"

The doctor said she hadn't.

"Okay," he said, "Then tic-tac-toe -- you know tic-tac-toe."

The doctor smiled, "Yes."

Tal said, "When was the last time you played tic-tac-toe?"

She couldn't remember.

"Right," he said, "Exactly. When you first played tic-tac-toe as a little kid it was kinda fun; there were maybe a few days there, maybe a couple weeks where you didn't have it figured out. You played it with your parents, you played it with other kids, and, eventually, you figured it out. You understood the game. You knew to always play the center space if you went first, and you knew how to defend against the center space if you played second. There was a point there where you had exhausted the potential of the game, it wasn't fun any more, and so you stopped playing."

The doctor listened.

"Life is exactly the same," Tal said, "And I don't have any problems with life; it's a fun game that you play for awhile. But then it's not fun any more. Life itself isn't the problem, it's just that I've played it all out, I'm tired of it, and I'm just ready to go back in the box."

She prescribed SSRI's and mood stabilizers.

#

It was so, so long. That time in the psych unit.

There was so much time to think about death.

One day, after having waffles and sausage for breakfast, Tal was headed back to his room, when a tech stopped him.

The tech said, "Hey Tal, what's up? Talk to me. What's on your mind?"

The tech was a short man with gray hair and Tal had been a real asshole to him during detox.

He was smiling. He was listening.

Tal thought about how the only other thing to do was lay in bed.

"Okay," Tal said, "What's on my mind is death."

The tech nodded.

"And how I want to die."

He nodded.

"And how everything is pointless, anyway."

He was listening.

"How everything is empty."

The tech somehow smiled even more, because he had something to say.

Tal said, "What?"

The man said, "What's empty?"

Tal didn't understand the question.

The man waited. Then he put his hand on Tal's shoulder, and he said, "No such thing as emptiness," and then he looked down at his iPad and he walked off.

Tal went to his room, laid in his psych safe bed with his psych safe blanket, and eventually he had a memory. There was a programming class he had taken one summer. It was one of the first programming classes he had ever taken and there had been an assignment on C-strings and, while he completed the assignment, he had a lot of trouble understanding the concepts.

In the C programming language, human-readable text is represented as "strings of characters", so that "Hello, World", could be seen as twelve sequential characters: the 'H' character, the 'e' character, and so forth. According to the textbook and his teacher, strings were delimited by a null character; the computer knew the string was over when it encountered a null character.

But this seemed absurd. How could that possibly work? How could you have a null value in memory? Even if you had a zero, that was still a zero: it contained the numeral '0'. How could there ever be a null value? Furthermore, if there *was* a null value, how could the computer, or anything, ever recognize it? This seemed impossible.

What he had later found out was that, in fact, there was no truly "null" character; that was indeed impossible; strings were not terminated by some sort of specific nothingness, but by a specific character with a defined value, namely backslash-zero (\0). Therefore, Null was not null, but indeed had a value.

He laid in bed and looked at his own thinking and marvelled at how much time there was to "think about nothing".

He had meant this thought in the colloquial sense, like, there was so much time to think of unimportant things, but because he had just been thinking about "Null" and "Actually Nothing", the idea was humorous to him and so, for the first time in weeks, Tal smiled a little bit.

#

In the afternoons, after lunch, they had showers.

The tech, whose name was Tim, poked his head in Tal's room, and he said, "Tal. Shower?"

There was a long pause.

Tal said, "Okay."

#

The next morning, Tim sat next to Tal while he was eating breakfast. It was biscuits and gravy; Tal had come to realize that breakfast went in cycles: you had waffle sticks and sausage one day, and then the next day you had biscuits and gravy. On the weekend, they had cereal.

Tim asked, "What's on your mind?"

Tal almost said, "Nothing," which made him smile again.

Tim saw this and raised his eyebrows.

"Well," Tal said, "What's on my mind is how breakfast goes in these loops. How one day it's waffle sticks and sausage, and then the next day it's biscuits and gravy."

Tim said, "Which do you prefer?"

Tal said, "I don't care."

Tim said, "I prefer the biscuits and gravy," then he said, "Keep your chin up, Tal."

#

It was truly impressive how long a week lasted on the psych unit.

Tal laid in bed and wondered at how he could not explain that all this time was nothing, that the time was something, and that whenever he went to explain what it was, he encountered, well, something again.

He looked up at the ceiling. Between him and the ceiling there wasn't nothing either, there was something. There was air, for example, and there were radio waves. He thought about what it meant for him to say, "There was nothing between him and the ceiling."

He didn't know what that meant, because if there was really nothing between him and the ceiling, then the ceiling would be pressing down against his face.

It was a mystery.

#

One day, the doctor asked Tal if he still wanted to kill himself, and he said that he wasn't sure.

She asked what changed.

He said, "Do you remember how I said the thing about tic-tac-toe? How the game gets boring after you figured everything out?"

She said, "I remember that, yes."

He said, "I guess, the thing is, well, I wonder if I didn't really under the rules."

She said, "Do you think the meds are helping?"

Tal said, "I don't think the meds have anything to do with it."

She said, "Alright."

He said, "My mood is not any different, not really. When I think about going out into the world, I have no interest in that, still. I don't have any desire to do any certain job, for example. I don't care about any of those normal things. I don't really want to do any drugs, either. On the one hand, I still don't care about living, and I still don't have any particular interest in staying alive, but on the other hand, I am not so sure I knew everything. I guess..."

He trailed off.

She was listening.

He said, "I guess. Well. The thing is this. I still feel the same way about life. I don't really feel there's anything for me in life. But what's different, is that I don't have the same opinion on death. I don't have any opinion on death at all, whereas before I had a very strong opinion on death."

His doctor's name was Dr. Ling, she was a young doctor, and she looked interested.

Tal said, "What I mean to say is, I wanted to kill myself very badly because I wanted oblivion. You know?"

She nodded.

"But what I think now, is that I doubt that oblivion is possible."

Dr. Ling looked at Tal and she said, "You still don't want to live, but you're not so sure that you want to die."

"Yeah."

She said, "Okay. I think that's progress. Let's keep you on the SSRI and see how that goes."

#

Tal had been on the psych unit for twenty days before he decided to call his brother. It was a Saturday, and on Saturdays there was absolutely nothing to do; they didn't even have their regular groups.

He got the phone from the nurse's station and called Benji.

"Hey, Benji."

"Tal! How are you doing?"

He heard Benji say to someone else, "It's Tal."

Tal said, "I'm okay I guess."

Benji was silent.

Tal realized this was a rare moment; Tal realized that Benji was fully listening. It might have been the first time.

Tal said, "I don't know if you know this, I don't know if you figured it out or if anybody said anything."

Benji was still listening.

Tal took a deep breath, "Well. After Aunt Kendra died."

At the time, the urges were still hitting him hard. He had never shot up, but he often fantasized about it in the psych unit. He thought about just how amazing it would be, how quickly he would Arrive. There was that sort of careless dream, and he knew that when you snorted it, it took awhile to arrive at that place, that it was a slow-arriving process. But he knew that if he shot up, the arriving would be instant, and he knew the misleading dreams would carry him to that place quickly; he knew the moment he was discharged he would go back to his apartment, he would get his "emergency backup" baggy from underneath his bathroom sink, and that he would be fucked once again.

Why was it so hard?

"I guess you could say I got a problem. And the thing is, I need help."

#

The following Monday when Tim came on the unit at six-thirty in the morning, Tal was sitting in one of the psych safe chairs in the hallway.

Tal grinned at Tim.

"Hey, bud," Tim said.

"Hey, Tim."

Tim stopped, "You look happy."

"I'm not going to kill myself."

Tim said, "That's great. What changed your mind?"

Tal said, "Do you remember when you asked me what was empty?"

Tim nodded, he said, "How did that help?"

Tal said that it changed his opinion on death.

Tal said, "I don't think death is nothingness, because there is no such thing as nothingness."

Tim listened.

"So, it seems to me something more along the lines, of, like -- and I'm not saying this is what I actually believe, only that it's a possibility within what I think. It's that, hm. It's like, it could be, we live this life over and over again for eternity. Because we know that this life exists -- at the very least we know that this exists -- and we know that this life cannot stop existing, because there's no nothingness for it to disappear into."

Tal paused, then said, "I don't have it figured out completely, but in any case, everything is permanent. And the thing about that is, if everything is permanent, if all moments of your life are permanent, then you have to do your absolute best to live the best possible life. I don't really know what that looks like, but I'm going to try to find out."

Tim had a tear in his eye and he said, "Tal, that's fantastic."

#

On Friday of that week Benji came to the hospital and picked up Tal.

Benji had arranged for Tal to go to a rehab; it was a 90 day program and if Tal thought he had a lot of time to contemplate during his twenty-seven day on the psych unit, he was about to overflow with contemplation at The Ranch.

The Ranch

The Ranch followed the 12 steps. Honesty, Openness, and Willingness; this was H.O.W. it worked.

In the morning, there was breakfast. Breakfast was incredible. Then there was lecture, in which various aspects of addiction were covered. Then there was the morning AA-style, big group meeting; all forty men participated. Then there was lunch, which was incredible. After lunch, there were small groups. After small group, there were two hours of free time, which usually consisted of something like smoking cigarettes, or hitting golf balls, or walking by the pond. Some people read. Then there was dinner, which was incredible. Then there was evening big group. After evening big group, there were two more hours of free time before lights out.

#

It only took Tal about forty days to figure out the program, after which he mostly talked to other clients and helped them through.

He would explain it like this: we go through life, and we develop these little knots; these little resentments, you could say, and once we had tied them, we forgot they were there. These things built up, these resentments, these hatreds, these hang ups, and the first thing to do with them was to figure out, to remember, what they were.

He had resentments about his parents, Tal would say, that he had been born and there had been no reason, or purpose, or direction for him. He had resentments about his dad, that his dad had never cared about him. He had resentments toward "God" or "Society" or "The World" in that his mom had died, that his aunt had been treated so unfairly; he resented the narrative of romantic love, that he had believed for so long that love was the solution; he had resentments in that, he thought he was a smart guy, and that, if society were what it purported to be, this fair thing that rewarded noble qualities, then he ought to have been at the top rather than greedy assholes; he resented that the greedy, stupid, hateful assholes could charge $150/hr for his work while only paying him $25/hr, and so on.

Rediscovering your resentments was extremely important because the next step was letting go of them. Why did we have to let go of them? Because there was no other choice. You could either die in a ditch, or you could let go; that was the only option. Other people, maybe they could keep holding on to all their little resentments, that was their dubious luxury, but not ours. You had to accept it, you had to stop fighting and to be truly ready to let go you had to have hit that rock bottom, that place where you knew you were going to leave this life.

Then, when you were able to identify and let go of all those resentments, well, that was where the miracle happens.

#

When someone graduated from The Ranch, there was a specific ceremony.

To begin, the graduate sat in front of his forty fellows and his counselor talked about his journey with the counseled.

Tal's counselor addressed the group and said, "This guy, I don't think we've ever had someone that was a better example of how it works; from day one, he has been the exemplified honesty, openness, and willingness."

The counselor, whose name was Bob, then told an anecdote about Tal, the group laughed, and the next part was for Tal to make a speech.

Tal stood up, shook Bob's hand, and then addressed the group.

He said, "One time, for big group, Bob had us do a meditation. He told us to close our eyes and practice this visualization. He said, breathe in the good, exhale the bad. And I sat there in my chair and I thought, nope, wrong Bob. That is the problem with the world, that is the opposite of what you do. Think about it, if everybody breathed in the good and exhaled the bad, then there would be no good to inhale! The thing to do," Tal said, "Was to inhale the bad. Was to hold it in your heart, to transform it, and then to exhale the good."

Bob laughed.

Tal smiled, "My point in saying that, is that it's what this place does, and any good place, really. You *inhale* the bad, the suffering. You listen and you heal, and then you *exhale* the good. I'm very grateful for this place, and for this experience."

He paused and people clapped.

He waited for the clapping to end, and then he said, "My father died when I was still pretty young, and there's something I learned here that I wish my dad had known."

He told a story about the last conversation Tal had with his father. It was night and Ronald had been on the back porch. His father was drunk and had gone out to admire the pool. The pool was lit up and glowed a beautiful, wavy, blue-green-yellow.

The pool had been a big thing for Ronald. He had struggled a lot, moneywise, for most of his life. And the pool had been this symbol that showed he had made it. They lived in a nice house then,

and though Tal never thought of his family as poor, as an adult, he realized that things were precarious. He recalled one year asking for a PlayStation for Christmas, and his dad had sat him down and talked to him; he had said, "Tal, how bad do you want this? Because, I think we can do that, but you'll have to convince your brother to share it with you as your big gift, and, I'm not trying to be mean, but, you'll probably have to forego birthday gifts. Do you understand?"

"I didn't mind at all," Tal said, "I thought that was fantastic. And, besides, I did get a birthday gift, I got a copy of *Twisted Metal* and a pair of shoes."

But, Tal said, later in life, when he looked back on this, he understood his dad would have put the Christmas gift on credit, and that he would be paying it off for awhile. He never knew exactly what his dad did, but it had something to do with maintenance; his dad had a big work toolbox that he kept in the bed of his truck, and he kept jugs of chemicals in the garage, with their red yellow and blue labels. And his work had something to do with water, because so many of the materials around his home office were water themed; his binders, his pens, and so forth; he had some sort of business that Tal never understood as a kid but that later in life, his brother would tell him, he had done boiler maintenance at processing plants. This made sense, Tal remembered his dad often having to travel far and to be gone for long times on these particular jobs. But, eventually, his dad became successful. Successful enough that he could buy a house with a pool.

Tal had gone outside to look for Ronald that night because Tal's mom had asked him to relay a message that she was staying with her sister that night and to call her in the morning.

Ronald didn't drink very often, but he was very drunk that night.

Ronald noticed Tal come out and he looked at him, glassy eyed. His shirt was off, he wore jean shorts, and he was leaning in his iron chair, holding a cigarette.

He had said aloud, while looking at the pool, "You can never stop."

Tal had said, "What?"

And Ronald, shaking his head, said, "There's no stopping. It just goes on and on."

Then Ronald stood up, said, "C'mere," and Tal let Ronald hug him.

Ronald went to the pool and tossed his cigarette into it. Then he had walked to the side of the house and flipped a switch and the light in the pool had turned off, the thing vanishing in the night.

"I understand that now," Tal said to the group.

He knew exactly what his dad had meant. That you set out to achieve something, and then you achieve it, but then it's not enough, and then you have to find something else, and it just goes on and on.

"Doing drugs," Tal said, "That was the last carrot on a stick that kept me running. But when I realized I could never catch it, I knew it was over. I knew I had no more running in me."

"What I learned here," he said, "was that there was a way to keep running, even without the carrot leading you on. It's a tricky thing to explain because it's so simple. We know what it is, some of us; it's to surrender and know God, it's to walk hand-in-hand with the spirit of the universe. That surrender is such a paradox, because you would think to surrender would mean to fall over and die on the path but, somehow, it ends with you running all the way to the end, until there's no more road. In the end, with Grace, it's no longer You doing the running, the running just happens; it isn't You that's doing the running, it's the Universe. Life no longer becomes such a fight, it becomes as easy as breathing, as easy as beating your heart."

Tal paused to think.

"It looks exactly the same on the outside; and it looks exactly the same on the inside. The man is still running, you can see him still running; and to himself, he still has thoughts and emotions and there are still decisions and everything; it's just that they happen on their own, in a way. Everything is exactly the same, except that everything is okay."

Tal had a funny thought that he kept to himself and laughed.

"The acceptance of all things means not only the acceptance of bad things and the submission to powers greater than yourself, it also means the acceptance of good things and the acceptance of the will, as it is. So, about my dad.

"My dad saw the pool in his mind, and then ran toward the pool. As soon as the pool became real, it disappeared; on the one hand, there was a pool, he saw this pool in his mind, and, then, once it was there, it was just a hole filled with water. Ironically, once it existed, it slowly vanished. He would need another thing, maybe it was a big house or maybe it was a big hit, maybe it was something else, I don't know. Maybe, eventually, you couldn't think of anything at all, and maybe, eventually, you got so jaded to it all you decided to end it, because the vacuum of life was so unbearable, that nothing was real. But I'm rambling."

The group laughed.

Tal said, "The thing is this. It's not an either-or situation, it's both. You don't have to settle on one or the other as being right: the pool exists but it's also just water, and it's accepting that both are true at the same time."

Tal cleared his throat to signal that he was ending his speech.

He finished, "I don't exist," he said, "In a certain way, there's just God, it's just God doing these things and everything else. But then, on the other hand, I'm right here, and you can all see me. Kinda funny. Anyway, I love you guys."

Tal hugged his counselor, people clapped, and then Tal sat down.

The counselor went up the lecturn, looked at Tal, and said, "So I did it wrong, huh? Great. So, uh. Anybody got anything to say about Tal?"

A lot of people had things to say about Tal.

PART II: BAILEY

Bailey

Bailey belonged to the universe; she was water in the river. But, also, since the river is just water and since Bailey was water she was the river itself. Bailey not only belonged to the universe but was the universe itself.

#

The hospital had a smell, the hospital had an atmosphere. People who were new to the hospital were acutely aware of this smell, this particular atmosphere, but when Bailey walked on the unit all she experienced was people.

Bailey, dressed in maroon scrubs, walked down the hallway to the day shift lead.

She reached the tall, bald, lanky man and said, "What's the situation?"

"Hi, Bailey," he said.

Bailey stood patiently.

He said, "You're getting a new admit. She's been in triage since noon."

Bailey was scanning the hallway as he continued, "You know this one, so brace yourself."

Bailey breathed in through her nostrils.

He said, "Bree's back."

Bailey said, "Shit."

The psych hospital had a lot of patients who were staples. While most people who were admitted stayed for a few weeks, left, and never came back, some were longer term. The hospital was not a long term facility, but sometimes patients stayed for many months because the social workers could not find a safe place for them to be discharged. There were plenty of homeless people who came through the unit, people who needed a safe place to stay for while, and they, after a couple weeks of stabilization, would be discharged to the homeless shelter; the social workers felt they would be alright on the street. But these long term patients could not be discharged to the street because that would be a death sentence.

One such patient was a man named Nguyen. Nguyen had previously been a patient for seven months, had been discharged with social security benefits to the care of a tenuous relative, but after three days had come back to the hospital with two of his fingers missing.

Nguyen was on the unit now. He was sitting on his bed and looking at the wall.

The day shift lead handed off his tablet to Bailey.

Bree was a specific sort of staple on the unit that the staff euphemistically referred to as "repeat customers". Bree had severe problems in a similar way that Nguyen had severe problems: she had no family or social support, she was a danger to herself, she could not survive on the streets, but she was not allowed to stay for months at a time simply because she caused too much trouble. Eventually, she would be discharged somewhere else. Then, the place she was discharged to would discharge her somewhere else again and, over time, she would end up back at Bailey's hospital.

"Fuck," Bailey said.

"Have a good shift," the day shift lead said.

One of Bailey's responsibilities as lead was to be the prime de-escalator; she was the first and best solution to any problem. What that meant right now, and what she was thinking about, was that she would be spending a lot of time with Bree.

She loved Bree, of course, but it was only a matter of time before the whole unit caught fire; this ambient disruption was what the breathing and anticipation and worry was about; Bree herself was managable, it would be her influence on the other patients. For awhile, things would be okay, there would be little fires that broke out and they would be extinguished in turn, but eventually everyone would be smoldering, eventually even Nguyen would lose his calm and punch the wall and by then it would be obvious to administration that they were unable to quell the inferno and Bree would be discharged.

Even so, as Bailey felt this storm approaching, she reflected on how calm the last few weeks had been and how there was a part of her that, though she would never admit it, lived for the fire. After all, that was the job, that was what she had signed up for; she was there to help people who were going through hard times and when her work had settled into getting changes of clothes for patients, handing out snacks, assigning chores and, every fifteen minutes, going down the list of patients on her tablet and checking off, "In their Room, Calm", well, she lost sight of why she was there.

There was a loud beep at the end of the hall. The door opened and two triage techs and one triage nurse walked with Bree down the hallway. Bree, like all the patients, was wearing a large gray t-shirt and green linen shorts.

Bailey calmly beeped herself into the nurse's station, passed through the half-height door, and reached for the box of blue gloves.

She paused. She considered.

Finally, she pulled out a handful of gloves, separated two of them, and put the rest in the back pocket of her scrub pants.

She beeped herself out of the nurse's station and started putting on her gloves.

Bree, flanked by the triage staff, arrived at the nurse's station.

Bailey was still putting on her second glove when they arrived, was looking at her hands still, and said, "Hey Bree, welcome back."

Bailey looked up. Bree was smiling. Bailey smiled back.

Bailey said, "You know the drill," and Bree responded by turning around and holding her arms out. Bailey felt around Bree's collar, under her arms, around her waistband, and she asked, "How have you been?"

Bree was a girl with short hair and she looked like she must have been in constant pain because of her teeth, she said, "I been in trouble."

"Trouble? Can you step of your sandals for me, let me check your socks."

Bree slipped one sandal off, and Bailey felt her sock.

"They kicked me out of the group home."

Bailey tapped Bree's other foot, and Bree slipped it out.

"Aw, I'm sorry."

Bailey felt the sock and said, "Alright."

The triage nurse who had walked on the unit was talking over the counter to the nurses in the nurse's station.

Bailey started to take off her blue gloves and said, "Are you hungry, Bree?"

Bree said, "Starvin'."

#

Bailey went to the kitchenette on the unit, which was behind a locked door in the dayroom, and she put a leftover lunch tray in the microwave.

Bailey wondered how long it would be before the first code green was called.

Bailey remembered last time.

The truly important work of the techs was something called, "emotional coregulation", which was a specific kind of listening. The trouble with patients like Bree was that, whether because her emotions were oversized, or because she had problems with executive functioning, or both, she could not deal with her emotions and her reactions to her emotions were inappropriate and that got her in trouble.

Last time, Bailey had been in the kitchenette. Bree had sat in a blue, heavy, plastic, psych safe chair in the dayroom and then she had got up to get a Splenda-sweetened lemonade, and when she to returned to the chair, she found the chair occupied by another patient.

Bree had said, "You're in my chair," and the other patient, being themselves another person with trouble regulating their emotions had said, "Sit somewhere else," and Bree had said, "No! That's my fucking chair!"

"It's not your fucking chair, bitch," was the response, and then Bree threw the lemonade in the other patient's face.

One of the techs working the dayroom yelled, "Code Green!", Bailey heard this, from within the kitchenette, and within one-third of a second she would evaluate the situation and then in another two-third of a second she would neutralize the fracas.

This reminded Bailey.

As the microwave hummed, she withdrew two of the gloves from her back pocket, from the large wad, and put them in her front scrub pocket.

There was no code green called. The microwave beeped.

Bailey withdrew the styrofoam tray and left the kitchenette. Bree was standing outside the door, waiting with her lemonade.

Bree said, "Ooh! What is it?"

Bailey said, "Some sort of chicken."

Bree said, "Oh. My favorite is spaghetti."

Bailey said, "Well."

Bree said, "It's okay."

Bailey handed her the tray and they walked to a table in the dayroom.

Bailey sat with Bree, "So, what happened at the group home?"

"This *bitch* took my markers. And she lied about it too."

Bree looked sheepishly at Bailey. Bailey was listening.

"So," Bree paused, "Well, she deserved it."

Bailey was listening.

There was a mantra on the unit, "The solution is connection."

Because when the code green had been called last time, all Bailey had to do was yell, "Bree!" and the problem was solved.

#

The afternoon unfolded without issue; dinner, evening group, meds, showers. The momentum of calm seemed to prevail, and nobody was upsetting Bree. At eight o'clock, Bailey took her break, stood outside and vaped. She checked her phone for messages from her husband, there were none, and she considered.

It was a good thing that Bailey had been the first person Bree met on the unit.

Bailey had this sense about her own presence, and she wondered about it sometimes. She knew she had prevented many fires before they broke out. Just how many was impossible to know, of course, but she imagined that, had Bree come on the unit two hours earlier, and had it maybe been up to the day shift lead to connect with Bailey who, even though he was good, well, who knows what would have happened?

(Deep down, she even wondered if triage had kept her until Bailey arrived.)

There was no way to know how many fires you had prevented, but Bailey, taking pulls off her grape vape, knew it was a lot. She remembered a time when her number two, a tech who no longer worked there, had come up to her and had said, "Room three's gonna have a problem, Brandon and Michael don't get along, but I know it's not a problem since you're working the unit."

Bailey sighed, exhaling vape cloud, and beeped herself back into the building.

She heard over the intercom, "Code green, west. Code green on west."

#

"He's disgusting!" Bree was saying to Bailey.

Bree was being held by two male techs, one under each arm, and the three of them were leaning against the wall. Bailey was standing in front of her.

"Tell me about it, Bree, what happened?"

"He's disgusting! He's sick!"

"Hey--hey, okay. I hear you, but tell me about it, what happened?"

The fires were beginning; all Bailey could do was feel the feelings, connect, validate and exist with them; this fire would pass.

"He was peeing in his room!"

Bailey frowned, "What do you mean?"

"He was standing in the corner, pissing in his room!"

"Who?" Bailed asked.

"I don't know, that guy!"

One of the male techs said in a low voice, "It was Brandon."

"Oh, Brandon? God, they need to discharge him. Look, Bree, I understand, I agree, but you have to focus on you, alright?"

Bree's face remained upset, but the emotions were settling, "Just stay away from him, alright? Okay? Just for awhile, for me, okay?"

"Okay."

"Can we let you go?"

Bree took a deep breath. Bree exhaled, "Yeah."

"Alright," Bailey said, and the two techs let her go.

By tomorrow, maybe it would take a few days, the momentum of calm would be reversed. It depended on who was working.

#

At the end of Bailey's shift, after she had left the unit and packed up her lunch bag and backpack, she went to the cork board and checked the roster. She already knew who would be working night shift tonight, and she already knew they wouldn't be any help.

She ran her finger down the page of day shift.

"Eh."

She stood there with her thumbs under her backpack straps and shook her head.

On the way out of the building, Bailey stopped by the nurse manager's office. The door was open, and the night shift manager was there. Bailey poked her head in.

She said, "We got almost nobody on nights, and days are pretty thin too."

Melonie, the night shift manager, said, "New batch is coming in next week, two are nights. One guy's seven-p to seven-a."

Without enthusiasm, Bailey said, "Great."

Melonie laughed.

Bailey said, "You think any will stick around?"

Melonie said, "Dunno, haven't met them yet."

Bailey Meets Tal

He came on the unit at six-thirty in the afternoon.

"Oh!", Bailey thought. And then, less than a second later, "Oh."

"Hi," the man said, "I'm Tal."

"Great," said Bailey, "Nice to meet you."

Great, she thought. A beautiful man. A big, beautiful, stupid man. Wearing a Polo shirt. He won't last two fucking seconds here.

Bailey said, "Tal. Can you take the trash out for me tonight?"

Tal smiled and bowed his head slightly.

He said, "I would do anything for you."

Bailey smiled, she couldn't help it.

She asked, "Do you know where the dumpster is?"

He said, "No."

She said, "Okay. Follow me."

She told the nurses she was stepping off, but that she would be right back.

Bailey led Tal toward the end of the hall.

There was a patient standing near the door as they approached. Well before they made it to the door, Bailey said, "Anthony. Away from the door."

Anthony got away from the door.

Bailey passed her badge across the RFID scanner, it beeped, and the door unlocked with a loud click. Bailey and Tal walked through. The door slammed behind them. They stood in a vestibule, there was a second door, and, once again, Bailey passed her badge across the RFID keypad, there was a beep, and this door's electromagnetic locks also unlocked with a loud click.

This door also slammed behind them.

As they were walking through the fishbowl, the round, glass domed room which connected the various units and wings of the hospital, Bailey asked, "Have you worked psych before?"

Tal said, "No."

Bailey said, "It's pretty rough," swiped her badge once again, and another set of doors loudly unlocked. They passed through the doors, and stepped onto the hallway of offices, which were vacant in the evening.

Tal said, "Nothing you can't handle, though."

The door slammed behind them.

Bailey took this one-on-one walk to the dumpster with every new hire. The point of this walk was to get them alone and to see how they acted. To make her own judgment.

She said, "No. Nothing I can't handle."

This good looking guy was wearing a Polo shirt and cargo shorts, he looked like he belonged in an office, but he had walked onto the unit like it was home; the foreboding doors had not rattled him. Her judgment remained in the air. Was he hot? Was he stupid? Was he strong? Was he weak?

She asked, "What did you do before this?"

Tal laughed.

He said, "The last real job I had, I worked with computers. Web development."

Bailey stopped walking. Tal stopped walking.

"What?"

Tal said, "It's been three years."

She stared at him. He stared at her.

She turned and continued walking.

Tal said, "It is my life philosophy that we should live our lives the best possible way we can."

As they reached the door to the outside, Bailey said, "And so that's working at a state psych facility?"

Tal stopped in thought. Bailey waited.

Finally, Tal said, "Yes."

"Okay," she said, and she beeped open the fourth electromagnetically locked door.

#

That night, Bailey buckled her seatbelt for the long drive home.

She checked her phone. Her husband had sent her $10 through CashApp and sent a message telling her to stop by Walgreens on the way home.

#

The next time Tal beeped on the unit, he was wearing black scrub pants and a black and grey tie-dye shirt. A patient approached Tal and Tal smiled, they talked.

He might last more than two seconds.

#

A week later, Bailey witnessed Tal in a hold.

One patient, an old man, talked non-stop. His voice was deep and it was loud.

It was almost ten o'clock, and everyone but this fire starter had gone to their beds.

The old man sat in one of the chairs in the hallway, and he was saying, "So I said to her my mother died when I was child, but I know who killed her. You know? I said, well, in California. It was a bus ride. And this man said he was going to kill me. I said, you don't know my mother. And my mother did not name me Eugene. So I got off in New Mexico. They keep saying Eugene. My mother did not, my mother did not give me. And this is bullshit. What? Why am I here. All I want is a cup of water. Is that so hard?"

Tal said, "Eugene, there's --"

Eugene yelled, "My name is not Eugene!"

Tal said, "I'm sorry. What do you want to be called?"

Eugene yelled, "My father's name was not Eugene!"

Tal said, "Look, if you want water, there's a water jug right here, you can get a cup of water."

Eugene, in his normally loud voice, said, "They took my shoes. I said why did you take my shoes?"

Eugene yelled at Tal, "Why did you take my shoes?!"

From across the hallway, a patient shouted, "Shut up! Shut the fuck up!"

He was a large boy, and Bailey, at the other end of the hall, saw him emerge from his room with intention. She shouted, "Hey!", and broke into a sprint.

Tal was much closer, he turned and saw that Eugene was about to get clobbered. Eugene fell backwards out of his chair, seeing this large boy approach him.

But then Tal had him wrapped up, perfectly; had come in at a 90 degree angle, went into a one arm bar, and was sitting against the wall holding the angry patient in his arms.

Bailey arrived but there was nothing for her to do.

She put her hands on her hips.

She said, "That is a good hold."

Tal, breathing heavily, said, "Thank you."

#

The next day, after meds had been passed, when there was not much to do but record "calm" for each patient every fifteen minutes, Bailey stood next to Tal and said, "Is a hundred dollars a month a lot to spend on dog food?"

Tal said, "I don't know."

She said, "I don't know either. But that's what I spend."

Tal thought about this. After a moment, he said, "I think it is."

Bailey said, "Well, I have a big dog. And she's my baby."

Tal said, "If that's what you spend, that's what you spend."

Bailey said, "My husband says it's too much."

Tal thought about that too.

"Anyway," she said, "I'm going to go on break."

She beeped herself off the unit and went to the break room.

Thirty minutes before, Bailey had stepped into the kitchenette, where she had kept her phone, and requested that her husband CashApp her two dollar for a soda.

She was standing in the break room and he had not sent her the two dollars.

She sent a text message, it said, "Nolan."

He sent her the two dollars.

She bought a Mountain Dew and watched TikTok videos of cute animals for fifteen minutes.

#

By mid-June it was hot. Sweltering. And, being a state hospital that was partially condemned, there were roaches. One showed up on the unit. It was in a patient's room, and the patient had come to Bailey. Bailey saw the creature, felt sick, and told the patient to wait in the dayroom just a minute and that she would fix the problem.

Bailey went to Tal, who was the nearest tech in the hallway, and said, "There is a roach in room twelve."

Tal said, "Okay."

Bailey said, "I need you to kill it."

Tal said, "Why?"

Bailey pulled him by the sleeve to room twelve.

It was huge.

Tal said, "Oh. That's my friend Charles."

Bailey said, "That's not funny."

Tal said, "Me 'n' Charles go way back. His uncle does my taxes."

The two inch long roach moved.

Bailey pulled on his sleeve and said, "I need you to kill it."

Tal was stunned, "Really?"

He could see in Bailey's face that she was serious. She was terrified. She looked like she was going to cry. By late June, Tal had seen Bailey participate in many holds. Tal had seen her on several occasions go through the extremely discomforting experience of taking point with patients who had been court committed but were refusing to take medication. Tal knew a bit of Bailey's personal history, that once in her life she had lived in trap houses, knew she --

"You want me to kill Charles?"

The answer was clear.

Tal stepped into the room, squatted near the bug, and it hissed.

He said, "I'm sorry little fella", stood up, Bailey looked away, and Tal killed the tiny animal.

Tal took a nitrile glove out of his back pocket, used it to scoop up the corpse.

He looked back and Bailey was gone.

Bailey was off the unit. She was in the bathroom. She was crying.

She did not like to see things die. She did not like to see innocent things be punished. The roach had been born into the world without any choice regarding who and what it was. The roach had not come into the hospital to cause harm. The roach, a living thing, did not deserve to die for this.

It was fucking bullshit.

She knew she was stupid to feel this way, she knew she was a dumb bitch with stupid irrational thoughts; how fucking pathetic was she to feel for a cockroach? She was hard, she was a leader; people looked up to her. And who was she if she did not have it in her to kill an egregiously trespassing subhuman piece of filth?

She frowned as she dabbed the tears away with toilet paper.

She knew it was a weakness that she had to hide, and she knew how to hide it; her defense had been long prepared, and if Tal asked, she would say, "I'm not scared of anything. Except bugs."

These creepy crawly things, you could not guess at what they were thinking, you could not guess at what they would do, there was a fear there because they were so unrelatable, but were animated, they were monsters, and so she was afraid of them, yes, it was irrational, but a woman was allowed her irrationality.

She was tough, but everyone had their weakness, and hers was bugs.

#

When she came back on the unit, she was aces.

She walked up to Tal and stood next to him.

Fuck Tal, she felt.

The monster was not the cockroach.

Fuck Tal, and fuck everyone like him.

She knew she radiated disgust, but this was natural; her disgust was obviously in regard to the subhuman filth that had infiltrated the hospital.

But Tal did not even consider the possibility it was about the roach; she was disgusted with him.

He was crestfallen.

Looking down, pathetically, he said, "But you told me to."

Her face, which had been twisted into defiance, relaxed into a frown.

She said, "I hate this fucking place," and walked off.

#

That night, when she got in her car and checked her phone, Nolan had sent her $10.

She sent him a message.

It said, "I'm on my period."

Nolan said, "Don't be loud when you get home."

#

On the drive home, Bailey tried to cover up the horrible truth. She tried to listen to music. She tried to think about the good things in the world. She yearned about using drugs to escape it, but there was no escaping the truth: the world was a terrible fucking place. A brutal hellscape without relief.

Except that, she remembered.

Tal understood.

This curiosity paused her raging discontent and sent her into a neutral contemplation.

As she saw it, there was a brutal quality to the world that she knew was true. What distinguished Bailey from her husband was their relationship to that brutality. If you accepted the brutal truth, if you

could let the brutality in and become the brutality, if you were willing to wield it and become it, then you would be strong, you would be successful, you would be an alpha; that was her husband. If, like Bailey, on the other hand, you refused to accept it, refused to become the brutality, then you were, by definition, bound to become subservient, you were the beta.

There was no morality to this, there was no right or wrong, it was just the way things were.

There was another aspect to the world of human social dynamics: lying, manipulation, and deceit. While, at the core, it was ultimately this brutality that determined your rank in the world, it was only enacted in society by the perception of that brutality: people like Bailey, who in fact had rejected brutality entirely, could still look like they were willing to wield brutality; they were able to craft a strong disguise. This was Bailey's strength: she was very good at deceiving people, and so they thought she was brutal.

But Tal upset this understanding.

He had killed the cockroach, even though he saw that it was an innocent, living thing; he was therefore willing to wield brutality. He had obeyed Bailey, even though he saw through her deception; he was not a fool.

Tal remained an enigma; his existence was perplexing.

The ideas made her tired, and she drove the rest of the way home in exhausted silence.

#

Leila heard Bailey coming long before she pulled into the gravel driveway. She had crossed the yard to the fullest extent of her staked chain and waited.

When Bailey opened the car door, Leila could not stop herself, she knew she had to be quiet, she knew she could not bark, but it was impossible not to wag and wiggle and whimper.

Bailey saw the light brown pit and her body filled with helium; she floated.

Bailey opened the gate and the dog jumped.

Bailey laughed, fell to her knees and hugged the dog.

The embrace was tight, intense, and Bailey whispered, "Who's my angel? Who's my angel?"

Leila licked Bailey's face, Bailey sobbed, and the two cuddled in the warm summer night under the stars.

Leila

Laaaay-laaaa!

When Nolan and Bailey had arrived at the pound, the song "Layla", by Eric Clapton had been playing on the radio, so that when Nolan had turned the engine off the music stopped abruptly, "Laaay-"

As Bailey had walked through the animal shelter, that was what she heard, "Laaayla", and that was who she was looking for. When she saw her, the happy brown pit, she knew. That was her.

Abuse I

Six weeks before the cockroach incident, on a Saturday, which was the first weekend after Bailey had met Tal, Bailey was sitting in her living room and looking at her phone.

Nolan came from behind and put his hand through her hair.

Bailey said, "I'm not in the mood."

Nolan smelled her hair, he said, "I don't believe you."

Bailey laid her phone in her lap. She remained still.

Her large husband went to the window and looked out.

Leila was basking in the sun. There were bees and every now and then the dog flicked her head, and sometimes snapped if they got too close.

Nolan said again, "I don't believe you."

He said, "I think you're just playing a game."

Bailey frowned.

"You're a tease," he said, "You like to tease me. You like to play hard to get."

He looked back at her, "Right?"

Bailey sunk further into the chair and continued to frown.

He walked to her. He whispered in her ear, "Right?"

Bailey closed her eyes.

She said, "Nolan, I'm sore, what if--"

Nolan interrupted, "There's bees out there."

He went to the window again, he looked back to Bailey, "I think we should let her in, what do you think?"

Bailey swallowed.

"Nolan," she said, "What do you want?"

He looked at her, his face hurt, "What do I want? I want to make you happy."

"Nolan, I-- I am happy."

Nolan shook his head, "No, I don't think so. Because do you what makes you happy?"

She thought about Leila, she thought about the smell of her puppy dog head, she thought about her wiggling, "Yes, baby. I know what makes me happy."

Nolan relaxed.

He asked, "What makes you happy?"

She said, "Your big cock makes me happy, Nolan."

He slid open the sliding glass door to the backyard, and Leila's head popped up.

Bailey stood up, and she walked to him.

She whispered in his ear, "Sucking your big cock makes me happy."

Nolan said, "I knew you were just playing a game."

#

That afternoon, Bailey sat on the back porch and had a beer.

She felt she understood why, in an intuitive sense, Nolan always won. He won because, of course, he was willing to wield brutality and because, over time, he had become immune to her deceptions; he knew who she was inside, knew that she could not accept the brutality of the world. And so, when he beat the dog, or even threatened to beat the dog, it was a pure expression of his knowledge of Bailey; it was, in a certain sense, very intimate; he knew her, he truly knew her.

And besides, this was the way of the world; she could not blame Nolan, he was just the world, and she knew that she had resigned herself to this dynamic with the world because it was worth keeping her sensitivity; it wasn't him, it was her; if he hadn't been there, then there would have been someone else exactly the same. She was who she was; she had declined to to play the role of the world because it meant she got to keep her sensitivity.

This is the cost you paid to have feelings, she told herself, you could sell your soul to be the dominate one or you could keep your soul, love dogs, and be subjected.

It was fine, it was acceptable and, for the most part, it was comfortable.

On most afternoons she would sit in her chair and he would lay on the sofa and they would talk about things on TV, and they would agree about those things.

"Look at this car, Bailey," he would say, "Look at this, what does Buick think they're doing?"

Bailey would laugh, "Looks like a car for bozos."

He would smile, "Right. A bozo car."

That was fine, she thought, that was acceptable and, sometimes, it felt real nice too; they had date nights; they went out to eat, Nolan told her how beautiful she was and how every day that he saw her she was even more beautiful than he remembered; he was so glad to be there with her; she made his life complete and that he was so lonely without her.

They had fun too, not just with Nolan but with the family; she remembered the Fourth of July, she had got drunk with her daughter-in-law, and the girl had said, "Hey Bailey! Look," she held a beer bottle between her legs, and she shot off a bottle rocket, "What do you think of my dick?"

Bailey had laughed so hard she couldn't breathe.

She thought about how her husband had got this house for them, and how he went to work and was respected there. She thought he was pretty great, all things considered; and, not only that, but she had Leila, who was running across the yard, and the fact was that she was still able to appreciate beauty.

On this afternoon, drinking this beer, she thought of Tal, who she had just met, who she was still trying to sort exactly; he was missing something. She pictured him in his Polo shirt and his cargo shorts and she thought, "What a giant fucking pussy," and then she thought of her husband, and she grinned to think at what an alpha she had landed.

Nolan slid open the backdoor, saw Bailey out there, and he said, "Hey babe, why don't you come rub my feet."

She would love to do that for him.

That night, feeling uncomfortable again, she asked Nolan if it was alright if Leila slept in the bed with them.

He laughed, "You can sleep with the dog on the sofa if you want."

She said, "Yes, baby."

As she cuddled with the dog, there was an uncertainty that grew in her; she kept seeing an image of Leila laying lifeless in the middle of the living room floor. And no matter how hard she hugged the dog, it did not relieve her of that image. She knew that he was capable of it and she wondered at what sort of thing she would have to do, or what sort of thing she would have to avoid, so that never happened.

She thought she would do anything, or not do anything, to avoid that.

Becoming Friends

The night of the cockroach ordeal, Bailey had hugged Leila and cuddled her; she had laid in the yard with her and sat on the back porch with her. The following weekend had been rough, but she was very good at navigating her life, and she knew the thing do was to focus on the positives.

So she did.

On Monday, she was driving to work and she was thinking that it was nice that she was would get to see Tal.

The thought scared her and the image of the lifeless dog came.

She was defensive to her own mind: she knew that she was not attracted to Tal, she was already making the argument, not any more than she was attracted to any guy, but she felt that if Nolan could see the thought, that she was looking forward to seeing her male coworker, well, it did not matter.

Hiding routines immediately began to take place; never look too excited to go to work, never say anything positive about work; these were passive routines; then there were proactive hiding routines: she needed to complain about her job, she needed to look like she wanted to quit, she needed

to talk about how hard it was; she needed Nolan to tell her it was good that she was working; she needed him to say she should go to work; these were fluent manipulations that she would pull off. Then there were backup plans if the thought was exposed; she would mention her new coworker that was gay, that complimented her earrings, that always noticed her nails; that he himself had even come into work with his nails painted, and it was wild what the world was coming to; she would have to sometimes bring him up: "You know the faggot at work? Do you know what he said today? He said he didn't think socialism was such a bad idea! Jesus Christ! I got to quit this job."

But the truth was she still thought the thought.

She was looking forward to seeing Tal.

#

That day was tough.

There were multiple "repeat customers" on both units.

There were multiple types of incidents.

There was a, "Let me the fuck up out of here right fucking now! If the doctor is the only one who can authorize my release then you better get that motherfucker in here right now or I'm gonna tear this whole fucking place apart!"

After a lot of struggle he got a 10-2-50, the sedative shot.

Then there was Sexually Inappropriate Behavior (S-I-B); a young man who liked to show his dick; this started quite a few fires among other patients. He got a large male tech to be his arm's length observation one-on-one.

Then there was a person who tried to suffocate themselves with their t-shirt while in the bathroom. She got Bailey as her arm's length observation one-on-one.

At six-thirty, Bailey's one-on-one was laying in her bed. Bailey was sitting in one of the psych safe chairs in the doorway of the patient's room, her feet propped up on the doorframe.

Bailey checked her watch, it was definitely six-thirty.

She took a closer look at the patient; her breathing made it seem like she was actually asleep. Still, there had been a patient once who had hid under the covers and had been able to cause many lacerations on her arm using a fingernail, even while on a one-on-one observation, and Bailey got out of her chair to quietly take a closer look.

The patient seemed to genuinely be asleep.

Bailey sat back down and checked her watch again. It was six-thirty-two.

Ten minutes later, Bailey heard the beep of the door behind her.

She turned around in her chair, saw Tal, who was smiling, and she shouted down the hallway, "You're late!"

She turned back and kept her eyes on her patient.

She sat. The patient slept.

The patient was still sleeping.

She checked her watch.

She turned to look behind her and saw Tal having a conversation with a repeat customer, an elderly fellow in a wheelchair who was prone to influencing the world by leveraging his bodily fluids.

"Tal," Bailey said, "Come here."

Tal acknowledged her with a head tilt, then he held out his fist to the repeat customer said, "Alright Jones, I'll talk to you later," and the old man gave him a weak fist bump.

Tal came up to Bailey, he said, "What's up, Bae?"

The exact moment it came out of his mouth, he was embarrassed, she could tell.

He said, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize your name shortened like that. I didn't mean anything by it."

Shit, she thought.

She held the moment. She looked at the patient.

She addressed Tal, "Listen. The units have been hell today and if you're going to be late, you got to let me know. Get me a piece of paper."

Tal stood there for a second. He had not been late. Bailey knew this: if Tal had actually been late he would have apologized. Tal knew Bailey knew this. Tal considered explaining the situation to her, that the nurse manager had pulled him into her office to discuss scheduling and working extra shifts. The second passed.

He pulled a small notepad out of his thigh scrub pocket, withdrew a pen, and offered these to Bailey. Bailey took these items, flipped open the notepad to a blank page, wrote her number down, and handed the items back.

Not only had Tal not been late, but the official policy was to call the nurse manager on duty, and then it was the nurse manager's responsibility to tell the rest of the staff that someone was going to be late. Bailey knew this. Tal knew this. They both knew that each other knew this.

Tal said, "Got it."

#

Three days later, Tal and Bailey were working on the same unit. There was a new admit with a particular religious fervor, who paced her room saying, "God will judge all of you. God sees all. God knows. And he's going to send you to Hell."

Bailey was slunk down in a blue chair outside this patient's room aimlessly scrolling through triage admission pictures on the tablet; it was a history of all the patients who had been through the unit in the past few months. Tal was standing next to her.

Bailey absentmindedly said, "I fully accept His judgment, but I don't think I'm going to Hell."

Tal said, "*Her* judgment."

She looked up, "Huh?"

Tal said, "It's easier for me to think of God as a woman."

Bailey was delighted; it was just the sort of thing that Tal would say.

Tal saw that Bailey was delighted and continued his explanation, "The way I view God is... God is everything. God is all things but God also gives birth to all things; God is the mother of all things, but God is also her children."

Bailey said, "Huh."

Tal thought.

"Hey!" he said, "Actually, I know of a really great picture. I remember seeing it and thinking, that! That's how I see God. Could I send it to you?"

Bailey ran this through her mental routines.

She said, "Sure."

When Tal went on break, he spent ten minutes finding the painting. Then he took out his notepad, found Bailey's phone number, and sent the first text, it was a picture of a painting.

The Dallas Museum of Art describes "Nature or Abundance" by Léon Frédéric:

Adorned with the splendors of nature, this nurturing mother offers her children sustenance and support. She is a goddess of fertility and abundance, whose mountainlike body is covered in flowering plants. This painting was once the central panel of five, with the flanking wings depicting the four seasons personified as children. Léon Frédéric's realistic, detailed depiction of a mythological image shows the spirit of symbolism in its transformation of a familiar type—the nurturing mother—into a sensual and energetic vision.

When Bailey got to her car to leave that night, she saw the text, saw the picture, and sent a message back, "Good Lord."

Later that night, at 12:30 in the morning, Bailey was at home scrolling through TikTok and saw a movie trailer. The trailer purported to be *Titanic 2*, which told the story of Jack having been

cryogenically frozen after sinking into the ocean, that he had been found and brought back, thawed out, and was now living in the modern world.

She sent a message to Tal, "Do you think this is real?"

Tal, who was still at work, took his second break fifteen minutes after Bailey had sent this message, saw it, watched the video and said, "No. James Cameron is busy with *Avatar* sequels."

She said, "I didn't think so."

#

Over the next two weeks, Bailey developed a robust plan involving Tal.

She wanted him in her life.

She wanted him as a friend.

She wanted to be able to talk to him.

Before she could invest in this friendship, though, she had to have a robust plan; there was no sense in making a close friend if that close friend was liable to torn away at any moment. The threats to this stable friendship were from Nolan and from Tal himself. The threat from Nolan was jealousy. If Nolan were to have any spark of jealousy, then it was over. To quell jealousy, she would think of Tal as her probably gay, but definitely effeminate friend: it was perfect that his first message had been a picture he felt represented God as a flowery, soft woman; it was the entire antithesis of a threat; it showed that Tal was so oblivious to the brutal nature of the world that he would not even realize that taking up brutality was the route to power; she could not lie though, about him being gay, because that would be too obvious; she would just *assume* that he was gay. The threat then from Tal was a sexual advance. If Tal were to make a move, if he were to ask her on a date, or he were to say something suggestive, then the defense of his theoretical homosexual nature would be evaporated; she would be unable to maintain her deception. Her strategy here was to make a habit of commenting on the brutal nature of her husband and that, under no circumstances, was she interested.

She first employed this strategy when the daily talk among the nursing staff had been, "If you could go on a date with anyone in the world, who would it be?"

When the question had been posed to Tal, he had said, “Shakira, easy.”

When the question came to Bailey, she had said, using her strongest skills of deceit, to make it clear that while this was a joke, it was also true, "I would not take anyone on a date, especially not someone I liked, because my husband would kill both of us."

This seemed to work, this seemed to work.

As long as Tal kept things platonic, as long as Bailey made a habit of only referring to things that Tal said which could be understood as embarrassingly feminine then, she felt, there was a very strong foundation, and it was possible for her to welcome this new friend into her life.

#

Toward the middle of July, Bailey dropped a few comments to Nolan about her weird coworker. She started by pondering aloud whether he might be gay. She recalled a story about how he had noticed her manicure and said that he had been following nail art on Instagram for a long time.

Nolan responded, "Well, that's alright, being gay isn't a crime."

"But look at this," and she divulged the handful of text messages she had shared with Tal.

Nolan, as hoped, showed no interest.

His final comment on the matter was, "Sounds like maybe he should be a patient."

Bailey laughed out loud.

Later though, when she had a moment to herself in the bathroom, she let herself feel hurt; Nolan had not even registered the statement as an insult to Bailey. She had been a patient, Nolan was the one who had her committed.

#

As Bailey saw the foundations growing sturdier, she let herself get excited; when she checked the roster on the cork board at the end of her shifts, her first concern was whether her and Tal would be working on the same unit the next day. If they were working together, she liked to have some question to ask or some fact about her life to share.

In the last week of July, she checked the board and saw that the next day they would be working together, and she realized there was a question she wanted answered, that had lingered the whole time they had known each other.

It had been almost three months now and she still did not know, "Why did Tal work there?"

#

She had to be careful, she did not want Tal to think she was interested beyond friends, she did not want her enthusiasm to be mistaken, so she made a significant effort to pose the question in just the right way, at just the right time. There had to be a lull, there had to be an aura of boredom, it had to be natural.

The chance did not come up that day, or the next day.

It was on the third day, when they were assigned different units.

Bailey, due to the fire tending of a repeat customer, was forced to take a late lunch and wasn't able to leave the unit until six-fifteen. When she walked into the break room she saw Tal sitting at a table, having arrived early and waiting for his shift to start, scrolling his phone.

When Tal saw her, his face lit up.

"Bailey!" he said, "Can I ask for a hit off your vape? I ran out of nicotine patches last night and haven't had a chance to get more yet."

"Sure," she said.

#

As they stood outside, Bailey watched Tal take a pull off her green apple vape.

He made a gesture with the vape which meant, "Do you want? If not, can I have more?"

Bailey said, "Go ahead, have as much as you want."

Tal nodded, and he took another pull. This was her chance.

"Tal. Why do you work here?"

He exhaled a small cloud and handed her the vape. She took a pull.

Tal was looking nowhere, considering the right answer.

"The people who come in here," he said.

Bailey could tell this was big, she had not seen him struggle to express himself like this before.

Tal looked at her. They held each others' gaze.

Tal said, "Nobody loves them."

She exhaled through her nostrils; she handed the vape off to Tal. Tal was thinking. He took a small drag, and he let out a wisp. Then he handed it back to her.

Tal looked into her eyes, and she held his gaze.

He said, "When I was inpatient here, there was a tech, his name was Tim."

Bailey felt it in her stomach. Bailey looked down and Tal looked into the distance.

He said, "A few years back I really got into meditation."

Bailey nodded and there were tears coming to her eyes.

Tal said, "There's a particular kind of meditation called loving-kindness meditation. In the guided one that I did, it started by asking to imagine someone that has loved you unconditionally."

Bailey felt sick.

Tal said, "Well, I did that meditation for weeks, but the fact of the matter is I couldn't think of anyone. If I thought of my mom, I thought she had loved me because I was her child. If I thought of my aunt, who took care of me, well, she loved me because she was lonely."

Bailey reached out and touched Tal's arm.

"Tim was the first person who ever actually showed me unconditional love."

Bailey was crying, she said, "I know, I know."

Tal looked at her, "It was the most precious gift anyone had ever given me."

"I know."

They hugged.

"I know, Tal. I know."

#

Their breaks synced up after that. Somehow, it just happened.

Two hours later, they were standing outside again and the sun was setting.

Bailey said, "So what were you in for?"

"Drugs," Tal said.

"No shit?" she said, "Me too."

Tal laughed.

He said, "Who brought you in?"

"Boyfriend. You?"

Tal said, "Brother."

They nodded.

Bailey did not need to think of things to talk about after that, she did not need to consider or plan or wait. The things were always obvious.

At ten-thirty that night, after night shift came on the units where, for thirty minutes they were more than fully staffed, Bailey left her unit and went to see Tal.

She said to him, "Do you have a homegroup?"

Tal smirked, "No. No I do not."

She told him to follow her to her locker.

There was a polaroid picture taped to Bailey's locker. Tal had never seen it before. It was a picture of Bailey hugging her dog, and it was captioned, "Beila".

Tal pointed to this, "Beila?"

"Oh," she said, "My dog's name is Leila. My friend saw us hugging one time and called us 'Beila', it's sort of an inside joke, I guess."

Bailey opened her locker, pulled out a flyer, and offered it to Tal.

She said, "We meet at six, Tuesdays and Saturdays."

Friends Beyond Work

Bailey had not been to a meeting in-person in months. Ever since they had moved out of the city, she had only participated via Zoom; three hours of driving was a lot for what was, aside from the rituals, a thirty minute meeting.

She had told Nolan that she needed to go in-person, her sponsor suggested she chair.

While Nolan had severely reined in her social activity, her travel, and her economic agency, he knew that there were certain unbreachable aspects of Bailey's life. The battle in which he had fought and struggled most valiantly had been over control of Bailey's phone. She had to have a phone but there were simply ways that she would be able to use that phone that he would be unable to detect: if he became more controlling over it then she became more evasive and, to his deepest dismay, the stronger he pushed to have control in this arena, the more control he lost. It was a long and hard battle, but he had learned a lesson, he had learned another hard fact of the world: the only approach to the phone, and to this arena of recovery, were as those sort of sacrifice plays that had to be made in order to retain

overall control of the game. Not that ever had the same overwhelming emotions towards recovery as he did toward the phone, but it was the same sort of thing.

Nolan said, "Okay. We'll go into the city together. I'll shoot some pool, and we'll get dinner after."

Bailey kissed him on the cheek.

#

Bailey spent two and a half hours in front of various mirrors that Saturday.

Her skin looked perfect. Her eyes wore black and silver, lavishly adorned, but looked as though their adornment were her natural feathers. She had tried dresses, she had tried jeans; she had tried on the attractive look of her twenties, she had tried on her demure, respectable thirties; she had tried on fancy, she had tried on relaxed. She had studied her hair a long time and saw every way it had ever been done, every way it had ever been straightened, every way it had ever been curled, but in all the time she considered, the idea of wearing it up never crossed her mind.

She left her boudoir, approached Nolan, and asked what he thought.

He said, "Doe... you look like an angel."

Bailey smiled.

#

Bailey didn't think Tal was going to show. The meeting started at six, and it was five fifty-five.

She looked around, there was a respectable group. There was Bailey's closest friend in recovery, Lexi, and there was Lexi's sister, who was Bailey's sponsor. There was a lanky man in a hoodie. There was an old husband and wife. There was a short muscular guy who had short red hair, who had been coming somewhat regularly but that Bailey had not met in person; there was a young girl who came with a walker, there was a squat bald energetic man who was clearly struggling with still using, and there were a handful of paper signers.

Bailey's anxiety turned to sadness as she checked her watch one more time.

When she looked up from her watch, there was Tal.

He had a friend with him.

The friend was pretty, she thought, but not that much prettier than her.

Bailey waved, Tal waved, they both smiled.

She cleared her throat, "Alright guys! Let's get this started with a moment of silence followed by the serenity prayer."

The small room was quiet and there was God.

Bailey said, "Hey everybody and welcome to the Saturday night meeting of Finders and Seekers."

The meeting followed the normal twelve-step opening; there was the explanation of the purpose of the group, there was the citing of how it works, and there were the introductions and proclamations. When the spirit of the group returned to Bailey, she shifted in her chair, cleared her throat and said, "Alright. Today we're talking about Step Two."

Step Two was, “We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”

Bailey caught Tal's eyes, they were there, and she said, "Tal, you're new, but do you want to start us off?"

Tal smiled, sat up in his seat, cleared his throat and said, "Sure. I'm Tal and I'm an alcoholic."

Tal said that his experience with Step Two had been that, he never really doubted there was a power greater than himself. That wasn't hard for him to imagine. He had been destroyed all his life by powers greater than himself. He said society had been greater than him, and money, and drugs, and all sorts of things. And that, really, he never doubted the existence of God, though his definition of God was maybe a little different than most people's. He said he always saw God as this giant thing that had

control over the whole universe, that God was infinitely vast and large. The problem, he said, was that he couldn't imagine that God, in its infinite vastness and grandeur, would ever care enough about him that he would restore him to sanity. He said the difficulty for him had been the line in the How it Works, "That He could and *would* if he were sought." God *could*, of course, that was trivial, the question was the *would*. He said it was like, God is this giant mountain, you know, and you go walking up the mountain, a tiny speck, an ant, and why would you ever think the mountain is aware of you? It's like, it'd be like if, as humans, we were able to pay attention to individual cells in our body, or maybe molecules or atoms or whatever, it didn't seem plausible. God was too big, Tal was too small -- humanity was too small, for that matter.

Tal paused.

“When I was in rehab, we had been encouraged to pray. Which felt futile, you know, it wasn't that God didn't exist, but that God was concerned with bigger things.”

Tal prayed anyway, he said, and he prayed and he prayed, and for the first few weeks he felt like he was just talking to himself. But then there was a moment where it sort of clicked; he was laying in bed just before lights out, and he had the definite sensation of being listened to and that, feeling that he was actually being listened to, he had to start being more intentional about what he was saying.

He said that, when he really thought about it, this idea that you could be talking to God, it became very hard to think of anything to say except, "Thank you", thank you for the universe, thank you for this, thank you for everything.

Tal said that, for him, the thing was that, when you really got down to it, when you really got down to this idea of God listening, and when you realized all you could really ever say was thank you, that there was a better way of expressing thanks than through prayer, and that it was by paying attention to everything.

“Attention,” Tal said, “Is an implicit expression of gratitude to God, gratitude for God's creation and gratitude for God's volition.”

He shifted in his chair, “But getting back to my original point. What I realized was that, yes, God was this infinitely vast thing, God was the whole universe and more. But, being infinite, God also has an infinite amount of attention. So yes, God could and would if one sought.”

There was a pause.

"And that was my experience with Step Two," Tal said, shifting back into his seat.

Bailey was beaming, "That was great, Tal. Thank you."

Then she said, "Mark, do you want to share?"

Mark was the old lanky man in the hoodie, and he was leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed.

He said, "Yeah, I'll share," and he sat up.

He said, "Mark, alcoholic."

Mark said that he had a similar sort of experience to Tal, in that he had grown up in the church, and that he had a certain idea of who God was when he was young, but then something horrible had happened in his life, really horrible, and he thought, "No, there is no God," and he said for a long time he drank and hated and resented until he had no choice but to come to AA. He said even after he starting coming he had still swore off God so completely that he even refused to go to AA meetings that were held in churches.

He said, "My sponsor told me that what I was doing, was presuming who God was, and then saying He didn't exist. That what I needed to do was to start changing my ideas, and to start examining it. And so I did, and so while my image of God now doesn't look anything like that," and he pointed to a painting of Jesus that was hanging up in the room, "Well, I have a much closer relationship now and I think I know Him much better."

Mark continued, "Not that I know Him completely, it's a journey every day, thanks."

The group thanked him, other people shared things that were not necessarily about the steps or their journey with the steps, but things in their lives and troubles they had.

The girl with the walker told a story about how her sponsor had told her that the process of letting go and letting God was something like imagining a house. That we have to open ourselves up, that letting go of our resentments is like opening a door or a window so that God can come in, but in order to do that, we have to believe opening the doors and windows is worth it.

It was touching and the bald man who was still struggling with using cried openly.

They handed out chips, the crying man took a promise chip, to make it twenty-four hours and to another meeting, and then finally Bailey shared.

Bailey said that her experience had been that she did not think God would forgive her. She did not ever doubt God's existence, she knew God was there, and she knew God was listening, but that she had been such a terrible person that she was unforgivable. And, if she was unforgivable, then there was no reason to ever change her ways. She said that she did not really accept step two until she had done step five. She said that, in step five, when she first was admitting to another human being the exact nature of her wrongs, and that then that human being had accepted her, then she saw that it was true that a higher power could restore her to sanity. She said it was the group, she said it was all those people who listen and understand without judgment, that this was her higher power, and that this was why she would always need to come back to meetings, to be in touch with that thing.

Bailey said, "Alright guys. With that, it looks like we're running out of time. Let's circle up."

Bailey began,"Our father. Our father, who art in heaven."

#

Outside the meeting, people stood around and smoked cigarettes, and some people left, and some people waited on rides, and Bailey came up to Tal and the girl he was with and she punched him in the arm and said, "That was amazing, Tal. How long have you been in the program?"

He smiled, "About two years."

"No shit?" she said, "Me too."

Bailey addressed the girl Tal was with, shook her hand, introduced herself properly.

Bailey said, "Do you guys think you would want to go out to dinner? Me and my husband usually go to dinner on Saturday nights, and we were going to go to Texas Roadhouse, you would be more than welcome to join."

The girl, who was pretty, who had very long hair and sparkly eyes herself, looked at Tal and then looked at Bailey and she said, "We're vegetarians."

Bailey's jaw dropped, "What!?"

Tal shrugged, "It's true."

"Well," Bailey said, looking at them, "Huh! Okay. Another time maybe. It was a pleasure to meet you."

Abuse II

Nolan had taken Bailey hunting just after they were married.

Nolan had thrown corn out and they had waited in the little shed.

They sat in silence, and sat, and sat, and Bailey got bored, and she got cold, and she wanted to leave, and she knew she would never do this again.

Nolan clicked his tongue and Bailey looked.

A deer had came out of the woods. The deer was beautiful.

Nolan had lined the rifle up, pulled the trigger, and the bullet went straight through the animal's heart. It fell over.

"Ooh! Did you see that?" Nolan asked Bailey, "Got him in one!"

Bailey had closed her eyes.

"We're gonna have deer for weeks."

#

"No. I'm serious this time, Nolan. No."

Nolan heard this and Bailey understood he had heard.

But there was no way around it, there was no sort of doubt to Bailey. One way or another, she knew, Nolan was going to accomplish the thing that he wanted.

Nolan had worked as a prison guard for many years and he understood the psychology and the social dynamics of the prisoner, on an intuitive level. He understood there was a game that was being played here, and he understood the different ways that he could win. For him, the game was not about whether he got this specific outcome in this specific case, the game was to change the behavior she had already exhibited; from his perspective, his objective was simple: to condition the thing, to train the thing.

Why she did it, though, he could not quite understand. She knew how it would end. She was already aware of the threats and the validity of those threats, and he did not presume she doubted their validity. He thought she knew that he would do this.

He handcuffed her to the fireplace. He ran a chain through an eye bolt. He opened the backdoor.

He thought, if you know that the thing is going to happen anyway, and you know that it's going to be worse if you do not accept it, then why would you resist?

You can see that you are causing this. Your resistance is causing this. You are the source of this pain. It is obviously you because, one way or another, I'm going to fuck you, and I'm going to fuck you how I want. That is a given. That is irrelevant. The question is whether you want the dog to suffer, and whether you want to suffer too.

You must want the dog to suffer.

So, as he whipped the dog, and as she sobbed, he knew it was not so much that he wanted to see her sob, or that he wanted to whip the dog, these things were non-factors to him. He felt effectively nothing about it either way, he was just doing his duty; that, really, he was doing her a favor.

She must want this.

"Bailey," he said, "This is what you want. You want Leila to hurt. You want to see her hurt. You want to see me hurt her. Because if you didn't, you wouldn't have said no."

He had wondered sometimes about the root of her problem; it was odd, it was indecipherable to him; he suspected that it was simply a case of her aberrant, criminal psychology that was beyond his understanding. Why did she need to see this? Why did she want this? Because, yes, it was very much a choice that she made. It was clear.

As he continued, as the pain and the sobs went on, he noticed that Bailey was not asking him to stop. This, he felt, was further proof that this was something she needed, that in one way or another she was relishing the experience. Maybe she just need this reminder, he thought, maybe it had just grown too faint in her mind and the fire needed rekindling.

But Bailey did not ask him to stop because she had long ago been conditioned not to ask.

In her torment, she saw this clearly: if she begged him to stop, then it would lead unalterably along the path toward that horrifying vision of the limp dog. She wanted to say no, that was her true and actual feeling, but she could not say no.

In the past when these moments had occurred, she too had thought it was because she needed proof of her spouse's noble brutality; she had needed to see that he was willing to do these horrible things, that it was not a lie, that it was not a deception; that, truly, in doing so he showed his honest willingness to accept the horrible truths of the world. But today was different; today she understood something on a different level: Nolan did not see the truth of her "no"; he could not see this truth because, in fact, he did not see. And that, therefore, by expressing his cruelty Nolan was not showing Bailey the strength that she lacked. He was oblivious and there was no tragic strength required to overcome anything.

She saw now with a disturbing clarity that Nolan really did think she wanted this; he was telling the truth. He was saying what he honestly believed; he believed that Bailey wanted this and he believed this because he was blind.

It was seeing his blindness with such clarity that made her stop sobbing.

Nolan was breathing hard.

He saw Bailey's emotional resignation and stopped. He was pleased. His behavior, his duty, had instilled in her a vital satisfaction. He had addressed that deep something that she needed. He understood this as something like therapy. She had this sadness inside her, she had this unhappiness, and it had to be expressed in this way so that it could be gotten over; Bailey had now gone through the catharsis that she needed, and he had been the instrument through which that catharsis was achieved. This was a fluent understanding, there was no conceptual analysis; he had attained that fluency long, long ago.

With the satisfaction of having popped a zit, he took his prize.

His confidence was shaken however, because after the dust had settled, as he was holding her in his arms and rubbing her back, Bailey said, "Nolan."

He was expecting a "Thank you," but she never thanked him, because she was either a stupid or an ungrateful whore; that was who she was at her core. She would not thank him because she lacked some sort of basic human understanding of the world, or because otherwise she lacked some sort of basic self-awareness. That was, after all, what caused these criminals to be the criminals that they were. She didn't see it, because she was blind to herself, which was she needed him.

"Nolan," she said, "I think I want a divorce."

"A divorce?"

But it was not a game: she was quiet, she was beaten, she was limp, there was no fight and there was no catharsis to be achieved.

He was confused.

"What?" he asked.

She didn't say anything. She just laid there, limp on top of him.

A completely satisfied and peaceful soul.

"Ah," he thought. She was doing this because she felt that now she did not need him. Perhaps he had done too good of a job. She thought she did not need him anymore, because he had done it; he had extinguished all of her pain.

He said, "You don't know what you want. You're only saying that because of the way you feel right now. But it'll come back, and you'll remember. You're only saying that because you have me now. But if you didn't have me, you would understand, you would want me back."

Bailey took a deep breath.

She knew with soul-aching certainty that he did not see her.

"Doe, baby, what would you do without me?"

Her stomach quivered.

She rolled off him and laid on her side.

He laughed, "You really think you want a divorce, don't you?"

He could not believe it, "You stupid bitch."

He saw the anxiety bloom. He knew what was going to happen, and he would not be able to stop it. He had pondered why it happened many times, but never came to a conclusion. Why it was that this particular thing could not be extinguished. It had something to do with her criminal disposition. Perhaps it was impossible for him to understand, simply because he was not a criminal.

She would do drugs and he could not, within the rules of his universe, stop her from doing drugs. The funny thing was she would think she could hide it from him. But he would know. He already knew. Tomorrow she would contact one of the people from her past, and that person would

enter her life again, along with drugs; he would have to fight that person away, and it would be this whole thing. There was never any peace.

Nolan sat up in bed and looked over at her.

"Doe," he said, tragically.

He said, "I'm sorry your life is so hard. I'm sorry you've had to go through so much. I'm sorry that you deal with all this."

He meant, of course, her twisted demons that led her to these experiences, these dark emotions and drives for pain and anguish.

"What can I do for you?"

Bailey's eyes became wet.

Nolan got out of the bed, went to the bathroom, and the tears rolled down her cheeks.

#

The next day was Sunday.

Nolan got out of bed, but Bailey did not move.

He asked if she wanted to go out for breakfast, but she didn't say anything. He got ready, and he came back and he said that he was going to go into town for breakfast.

He said, "You want me to bring you something back, Doe?"

Bailey didn't say anything. She laid in bed, she stayed still.

He looked at her, she had been extinguished.

Nolan left.

In time, Bailey formed thoughts: this was not resentment. There was no resentment. There was simply nothing there at all. The idea of meeting up with Darrell would not come to her for another hour and it only came to her out of boredom. There was nothing to do. The next day, when she got into

work, she would call him from one of the hospital phones, he would meet her around three o’clock at the hospital, and that would be easy enough.

She sat up in bed and sighed.

She picked up her phone and texted Nolan, "Coors."

#

"Coors," thought Nolan.

He had driven into town, had driven through McDonalds, and he had sat in the parking lot watching cars drive by.

#

What finally got Bailey out of bed was the realization that she needed to feed Leila.

She put her hair up, wore a big shirt and big shorts, and brought out the entire bag of dog food onto the back porch. Leila was laying in the far corner of the yard behind and under a Japanese maple. Leila had raised her head when Bailey opened the door.

Bailey stood on the little patch of concrete but spoke as if Leila were right next to her, "You want to eat?"

Bailey wanted to get closer but she thought maybe Leila didn't want to see her.

Bailey knew she was going to cry, so she said, "I'll just leave it out here if you want it, okay?"

Leila laid her head down.

Bailey put the bag of dog food down, sat, and then laid herself on the concrete square.

As she laid, the nothingness became sickness.

Bailey heard Nolan's car pull into the driveway, she heard a jingle from Leila's collar, that Leila had raised her head. Bailey heard the car door open, heard the gate open, and presently Nolan was standing over her.

She sighed, held out her hand, and Nolan gave her a beer.

Nolan paused for a moment.

He put the rest of the case down on the concrete square, then he said, "I brought you a sausage biscuit if you want. I'll leave it in the fridge."

She said, "No, leave it here," and he said, "Okay."

Nolan put the McDonald’s bag down beside Bailey and went inside.

Bailey sighed, sat up, opened the beer, and shotgunned it. She smashed the can in her hands and threw it into the yard. She opened the case and opened another beer.

Bailey felt the hunger in her stomach and reached for the paper bag.

Leila heard. Raised her head and so jingled her collar.

Bailey shot a look to the corner of the yard, she squinted toward Leila with playful mischief, "You want some sausage biscuit, don't you?"

Bailey stood up, felt a little dizzy, drank the second beer, crushed the can and threw this one in the yard too. She burped. She carried the case of beer and the brown paper sack to the corner of the yard and sat in the dirt next to Leila.

She opened the sack and discovered Nolan had bought two sandwiches. Bailey laughed. She pulled one of sandwiches out, held it in its paper wrapper in her hand, and Leila extended her head. She laid her jowls down in the dirt and looked at Bailey.

Bailey opened the sandwich, tore a piece off, held it close to Leila, and the dog licked the bite out of Bailey's hand.

Bailey laughed, "Is it good? Do you want more?"

Bailey cracked open another beer.

Best Friend

On Monday, Bailey was working on the West Unit. Tal was scheduled to work on East.

At six o'clock, Bailey went to take her lunch. There was a bag of *Wing Stop* waiting on the table; Nolan had sent the money right away.

Seconds later, Tal arrived.

"Tal!" she said, "My good friend. Welcome. Welcome to the land of the insane."

Tal smiled.

She said, "I got loaded fries, if you want."

Tal put his backpack in his locker, grabbed a paper plate and fork from one of the cabinets and sat next to Bailey.

He said, "I would. Thank you."

He forked a handful of loaded fries onto the plate and noticed that Bailey seemed preoccupied.

He said, "What's on your mind?"

She said, dryly, "I think I want to kill my husband."

Tal listened.

"Or maybe just get a divorce, I don't know."

Tal took a bite of fries, they were spicy.

He pointed to her soda and said, "Do you mind?"

She said, "Go ahead, don't backwash."

He took a sip, it was Sprite.

Tal asked about the units, how they were doing, and she said East was a breeze, but there was a code brewing on West.

Bailey was eating but she was obviously thinking.

Tal stretched his legs out, and folded his hands on his stomach.

He said, "Why do you want to kill your husband?"

She said, "He's just an asshole."

Tal looked at her. She got up and pulled paper towels out of a paper towel dispenser, then returned to the table.

She asked, "Have you ever fantasized about killing someone?"

Tal considered.

"Yes," he said, "When I was in high school. I had a girlfriend that broke up with me."

She went back to poking at the food, but she was not very hungry.

She leaned back, "I just get sick of his shit sometimes. What was your drug of choice?"

Tal said, "Heroin."

Bailey said, "Nice."

She said, "Do you use anything now? Anything that's not heroin, I mean."

Tal laughed, "Sometimes, yeah."

"What do you use?"

Tal was amused, he said, "Pretty much everything but heroin now and again. Why?"

She said, "Just wondering," and she scooted her chair away from the table.

She stood up and said, "Gotta tinkle, be right back."

In the bathroom, she went into the stall, sat down, and took out what appeared to be a tube of Chapstick. She removed the cap and poured a little bit of chopped up powder into the lid. She held the cap up to her nose and inhaled hard. She left the stall and checked her nose in the mirror. All good.

When she came back to the breakroom, she said, "Tal. Vape?"

#

Bailey hit the banana flavored vape, then passed it to Tal.

As Tal hit the vape, she said, "Were you serious? What do you use?"

Tal had a playful look on his face. Bailey saw that, yes, of course he was serious, but that he was considering a different sort of response to her question.

He exhaled a banana cloud upwards, handed her the vape, and he asked, "What do you want?"

Bailey said, "Fentanyl."

"Oh," Tal said, "I see."

"What do you mean, you see?"

"That's how you want to kill your husband."

Bailey blushed.

Tal said, "Yeah, I can get fentanyl."

Bailey's shift to contemplation was laid bare.

Tal noticed, he held his hand out for the vape.

She gave it to him.

She was thinking. Tal knew she was thinking. And she knew that, to him, it was okay that she was thinking.

Tal said, "What do you really want, though?"

Bailey put her hands in her scrub top pockets, and she fingered the false tube of Chapstick.

Darrell had dropped it off at 3 o'clock. He would be back, probably tonight. He would take this thing and hold it over her head.

"What I want," she said, "Is meth. But that's my poison."

She withdrew a real tube of Chapstick and applied it.

Tal nodded. Bailey held her hand out for the vape.

Bailey held the vape like a cigarette; she had one arm across her chest, holding the other up by the elbow. She was looking out across the parking lot.

"Coke," she said, "If you got me Fentanyl, you'd have to get me coke too."

Tal said, "I could do that," and she laughed.

She handed him the vape, said, "Keep it, I got another one in my locker," and then she beeped herself back inside.

#

Two hours passed on the West Unit, and Bailey went through the normal things. She did safety room searches, she sat in the dayroom and looked at the TV, and then at eight, she started corralling the patients for meds, "Med pass!", "Med pass guys! Come get your meds!"

She had, by seeing Darrell, started trouble. He would be hounding her now, telling her to come see him. He would be there when she got off work. He would be there when she arrived at work. And, as had happened many times in the past, when she decided to get back into drugs, she would eventually have to confess to Nolan that she started using again. Nolan would have to get some of his motorcycle friends, and then they would have to tail Darrell, and there would eventually be some sort of brawl, and all that. She knew. She used to do it for fun.

This was the normal, expected thing. The moment she confessed to it, Nolan would see he had gone too far, he would understand; he would zero in a little more on his control and then everything would be okay. You throw a rock into a pond and there are ripples. That is what happens.

But what if she did not do that?

Bailey stood in the hall in her maroon scrubs with her hands on her hips. The patients were all lined up for meds. In one sense, she completely believed Tal. She knew that he was telling the truth in that he could and would get her what she asked for. But she was not so certain that this had not been his long term plan. That, there is a sort of wickedness in all of us, and that, perhaps, once she became reliant on him in this way, he would suddenly cease to be her friend, would become something else.

"Alright," Bailey said into the nurse's station, "I'm taking my break."

At the same moment she beeped off her unit, she saw Tal beeping off his too.

They walked together to the little outside smoke hole.

She asked, "How's East?"

Tal said there was an S-I-B situation developing, and that it was his least favorite thing to deal with.

He said, "For the most part, the rules are easy to explain. You can explain why the rules are there. No, you cannot have a pen, pens can be used to self-harm. No, you cannot take a shower now, because we do not have the staff. No, you cannot get another tray because we have the exact number of trays that match the unit; if we get a new admit, that tray is for them. I have no problem explaining all that. But it's hard to tell two people not to hug."

Bailey touched her lips.

Tal continued, "I went up to Amy and Jonathan and I said, sorry guys, you can't be hugging on the unit. And Amy got all pissed, she was like, 'What, you think we're gonna fuck?', and it was like, I'm sorry, it's just that rules are rules."

Bailey nodded.

Over the feeling in her stomach, she said, "Okay."

Tal was looking into the far purple part of the sky; the sunset was behind them.

She said, "How much?"

He said, "Forty dollars for half a gram."

The statement lingered. He breathed and Bailey stood.

Unworded questions came into the air; they were not vocalized, not formed into sentences; they existed as feelings. The feelings became more naked, more exposed in the silence.

What about the Fentanyl?

The discomfort was accepted.

How am I supposed to pay for it?

There was a last hope.

Am I even pretty any more?

Then there was just silence, there was just air.

#

That was Monday.

On Thursday, Tal came onto the unit and got the daily report from a seven-a to seven-p tech as they walked down the hall: they were understaffed today, two people on evening shift had called in, the coffee hadn't been poured yet, and snacks needed to be refilled; the tech asked Tal if he wanted to pour the coffee, or if he wanted to take the hall while she did it.

Tal said, "I'll do it."

Tal walked into the dayroom, where Bailey was sitting with some patients, coloring.

The coloring sheets were those ones where you filled in the numbers, and then as you did so, what the picture was became more clear.

Bailey saw Tal disappear into the kitchenette, and said, "I'll be right back."

Bailey put her key in the kitchenette door, unlocked it, and stood close to Tal.

"Today has been hell," she said, "I been called a bitch, I been slapped, I been catcalled, I been run around by the nurses, who never do shit, even when you tell them something's about to happen, and I been just completely beat."

Tal said, "You know what else you've been?"

"What?"

He stopped pouring coffee and looked at her.

"Beautiful," he smiled, "Smart, talented, kind, strong."

Bailey grinned, "Tal, did you know you're my best friend?"

Tal knew this. In fact, Tal was pretty sure he was her only friend. He had thought this for a long time because several weeks back, he had sent a text message on Friday saying he was going to be a little late, and then on Monday, he had happened to glimpse her phone while she was looking at her messages, and that text, where he had said he was going to be late, was still, three days later, over the weekend, the second most recent on her phone.

Bailey was lingering.

"It's in my locker," he said.

"How did I know?" she said.

#

Because they were working the same unit, they could not take breaks at the same time; they had to wait until ten thirty, when night shift came on. Bailey and Tal took the trash out together.

Bailey waited with the trash cart in the hall while Tal went to his locker. He came back, pushed the cart, and she walked beside him. She beeped open the outside doors, and they walked toward the dumpster.

It was dark. Bailey took out her vape and hit it, then put it back in her scrub top pocket.

They emptied the cart, trash bags full of styrofoam trays, cups, empty cardboard boxes, many little bags from under each of the nurse's computers.

When the trash cart was empty, Bailey offered her vape.

Tal shook his head.

They looked into each others eyes for a long time.

Tal put his hand in his scrub top pocket, and palmed two baggies.

They stood beside each other, and he pressed his hand into hers.

She held them. Did it have to be her?

Tal motioned for the vape; she reoriented everything in her pockets, and handed it to him.

Peach.

Tal turned the trash cart around, and they started walking back toward the building.

Bailey beeped open the doors, and Tal pushed the cart through.

The door slammed behind them.

They walked down the long corridor, and Bailey had the very specific thought of saying, "I need to tinkle," but the thought just passed right on through.

She beeped open the next door. And then the next door. And then the next.

Murder

Bailey did not look at the two baggies until she had left the building and was in her car by herself. One of them had a pearly shiny chunk of cocaine in it, about the size of a marble, and the other contained a clear capsule that had hardly any powder in it at all.

Her phone vibrated. It was a text message from Nolan.

It said, "I'm sorry baby, I just love you so much I get carried away."

She responded, "I know, I love you too."

The bag with the pearly chunk was in her left hand.

What was she going to do with that? What had she really intended on?

Tal was still in the hospital. He was inside. He was working.

If she texted him. She wanted to tell him. She wanted him to know. She wanted to explain herself to him; she wanted to say why she was going to do it. She wanted to say that she was sorry, and she wanted Tal to absolve her. She wanted to say she was just a stupid girl, and for him to hold that for her. She wanted to go back inside, sit in the bathroom, crush it up and wait for him.

It would have been so easy if he had just told her what to do. But he had not said no, and he had not said yes. He had given her the gun, but he had not told her to shoot.

She turned the car on.

#

As she drove down the highway, she fantasized about what she would do.

Maybe it would be coffee, maybe it would be food; maybe it would be a mixed drink.

It would be in a mixed drink.

They needed to relive their wedding moments, they needed to remember what was good; she pictured it like that; she would say she needed twenty dollars for a surprise.

She would buy Sambuca, which they had drank much of at their reception. And she would come into the house with the paper bag, and he would be laying there on the couch and he would ask, "What's that?" and she would giggle and hold up the receipt and then put the bag in the freezer. She would lay with him on the sofa and kiss him on the side of the head.

She would say, "Let's make amends. Really. I have an idea."

He would look at her unenthused but listening.

"What if we got a new puppy? A Saint Bernard. Like Beethoven."

He would sigh, but he would come to some understanding in his mind that this was fair and he would say, "Okay, doe."

She would kiss him on the lips, excited, and she would say, "Do you remember our wedding?"

He would laugh.

"Do you remember what I wore?"

He would say, "You wore white. You wore my mother's shoes," and then he would notice, "And you wore that bracelet."

She would be wearing the bracelet.

She would giggle, "Do you remember what I didn't wear?"

He would laugh out loud.

"Yes, I remember what you didn't wear."

And then, excitedly, she would go to the freezer, and she would bring out the chilled Sambuca, and two shot glosses, and she would put on the wedding video, and they would tell stories about the people in the video, and they would get drunk, Bailey getting drunker than Nolan and then, finally, right before they got to the kiss, she would pause the video, get up, smile, and say, "It has to be perfect, Nolan!"

"Okay."

He would see her stumble into the kitchen and, as he got up to go to the bathroom to pee, he would see her as a little Bambi, a little thing that struggled to stand up on its own feeble legs. He would come back to the sofa, and she would come in from the kitchen with the two slippery nipples, the signature drink they had had at the reception, and she would hand him one with her left hand, and he would go to drink it, but she would say, "Wait! Wait for the kiss!"

And he would say, "Yes, doe."

She would hit play, they would clink the glasses and, just as the two ghosts kissed on the screen, they would take the shots. They would lay on the sofa, they would walk down the aisle, and she would think, "Til death do us part."

In the morning, she would wake up and discover that his body was cold.

She would look at him on the sofa, blue.

She would think about the ghosts on the tape.

#

As Bailey drove, she was overcome with memories. It seemed like a very long drive. Most of it was on a two-lane highway, and most of it was completely dark but for her headlights. She considered

how, over the years, there had been a slow dissolution of the things she was allowed to do. She reflected on how, one by one, they had vanished and how she had not really noticed how many of them there were, how much she had forgotten. They had been long hidden in her mind. She wondered how, over the years, there had been so many arguments; something would come up, there would be an argument; the argument would be the extinguishing of some idea, some thought that afterwards became implausible, never to be examined again. At first, she had thought of them as fires that had been put out; little ideas, little freedoms, one by one squelched forever; she had thought they were dead, she had thought they were gone forever; but as the road went on, they became more like the cicadas, that with each fire she had imagined put out, there had instead been a buried nymph; she remembered more things, and more things; they were not wholly gone, but had laid dormant in another form, as a seed; utterly forgotten, perfectly safe, until a great rain comes, pierces the great deep earth and, being so touched by the conscious mind, came to life; the insects that had laid dormant for so many years began to move. They were revivified, these curiously undead things, they crawled to the surface, the forest floor shook, and first there was one.

She had a close friend for many years, they went out to bars, they danced, they flirted with men, they hooked up with things interesting and new; no, she could not have friends like that, they were a bad influence. The last time she had gone out with Jackie, the last of those friends, they had gone bowling, Bailey had fun even though not a single person hit on them; but no, she could not do that, it was a path to her old life, and so the fire was extinguished, and so the cicada lay dormant, and then that very first cicada emerged: she once had friends.

A small town was up ahead. Bailey passed through the town, by a gas station, by a Taco Bell; but she could not stop for a soda, or to get a beer, she could go through the drive-thru for an after work taco; it was so ubiquitous, so thorough, so obvious, and suddenly the sky was full of the insects and

Bailey was struck by vertiginous wonder at the great mass, of the incomprehensible swarm of freedoms which she had forgotten that she had lost.

#

She had met him as a john. She was a dancer. She smoked meth, and he was there with some bikers. He was big and strong. He tipped well, he was respectful. She told him that she didn't usually do that, but that she would make an exception for him, which was mostly true.

He came back. And he came back.

He had said he wanted to take care of her. He had been persistent.

And once, she had had a bad night, and she told him about it.

The man ended up in the hospital, and she had thought, well, she did not want to be a dancer.

She went home with him. He had a tidy house. He had a clean bathroom. He was divorced, he explained that she was a drunk. He said she had run off with his daughter. Nolan had given Bailey the bracelet and said she was free to stay with him whenever she wanted. She had thought about the house she was living in, the room beyond the kitchen where she slept on the floor, the time she had found a dead mouse in her sleeping bag; this was freedom, she had thought. The trap had come on so slow; she was free to come and go, she remembered, and then she was less free to come and go, and then she couldn't leave.

There was no one in her life any more.

She thought of Lexi who, before she met Tal, she would have said was her best friend; but now she understood that Lexi had not really been a friend; Nolan had accepted that friendship as a sort of gentling companion, that he had seen this girl as an already broken pet; that it was okay for Bailey to spend time with Lexi because Bailey would learn from her; and he had been right. She remembered times she had complained to Lexi; Nolan always needed to know where exactly where she was and

Lexi would say, "Doesn't that just show you how much he cares?"; Nolan was so sexually aggressive sometimes and Lexi would say, "Doesn't that just show how attracted to you he is?"

After talking to Lexi, Bailey would always come to the conclusion that yes, it did mean that he cared. He cared about her a lot. He cared about her so much.

But, driving down the highway, she wondered now, what does it mean to care?

"Exactly," her friend had counseled, "If he didn't care about you, then he would let you roam free, let you go to bars by yourself, let you get raped, let you get taken away by drugs, he would let you lose your life. If he didn't care, he wouldn't be so scared of losing you."

That was the biggest thing. He was scared of losing her; without him, she was lost, she was reckless, she was a whore, and she would end up destroying herself again. He had saved her from the pits of despair, he had brought her out of prostitution, he had given her a place to stay when she had nowhere else. He had been the only person in her life that really and truly cared about her. For each thing she gave up, she would gain stability, safety, security; if he had not handed those things over, she would be dead; she was alive because of him, and only because of him, and she owed him everything.

So was it so much to ask of her to follow his rules so that he could be assured of her safety?

Will you let me take care of you and keep you safe? Will you let me take control of your money, so that you do not buy drugs; will you always have your phone on you, and always have the location turned on, so that I can save you, if need be? Will you move out to the country, so that no dangerous people could take you away and hide you? Will you marry me?

She saw those two people recorded onto that tape.

Who did he see? Who did he think he was keeping safe? Without choices, how could anyone know? They had each married a person that did not exist. She saw this but he did not, and he would never relent; he would go to any lengths to make her behave like the ghost he imagined.

#

When Bailey got home she kissed Leila on the top of her head. Bailey wondered at how she could not even force the dreadful image to come into her head; she tried but nothing came up; this was liberation.

She went inside and her husband was asleep.

She went to the bathroom, turned the shower on, and stashed the baggies; one in a jar of moisturizer and the other in the shampoo.

#

On Sunday morning, she would call 911 and she would cry, "He was fine! He was fine! He was fine!"

Funeral

The death was ruled an accidental overdose, in which the old biker had likely snorted something he thought was safe but had been laced with fentanyl. Toxicology had come back positive for fentanyl and because a baggy and straw had been found in Nolan's shaving kit the conclusion seemed obvious. He and his wife had been drinking and reminiscing and the man had decided to fortify the sensation; Bailey's heart-wrenching testimony about how they had been watching their wedding video and fallen asleep together on the couch was immensely hard to hear.

The funeral was held in town later the following week, on a Saturday morning.

Bailey’s daughter-in-law had asked her if she needed someone to stay with her, but Bailey said she wanted to be alone and to mourn, at least for awhile. In fact, her intention was to let Leila into the house and to cuddle with her on the bed.

As Bailey drove home from the funeral, she thought about the pearly chunk of cocaine in the shampoo bottle. She was unsure what her plan was exactly; she saw the glut of freedom; she could go out drinking, she could call old friends; she could party, there were all these options. But the truth of

the matter was that she had no particular desire to do drugs; in fact, she remembered that the morning she had called Darrell, what had really spurred her to action was not the drugs, but the tension and excitement of the fight, the control that she would be able to exert on both mens' lives.

Somehow, she thought, Tal knew that Bailey did not really want the drugs. Otherwise, he would not have got them for her.

Still. She had kept that chunk of cocaine.

As she drove past the fields of wheat and turned onto the last road before she arrived at the house, she thought she might keep that particular baggy for the rest of her life, to show and to prove that she was always making a choice; it would show that she was free, it would be a symbol of her liberation.

Finally, Bailey made it to the gravel driveway and parked.

She did not have to look.

The comfort was instantaneous: God was everything. God was here now. No matter where you looked, no matter what happened, there was God. All things were the universe. All things were God.

She had known, but now she knew that she knew.

The Teacher

Two weeks before Aunt Kendra died, Tal had an experience with a black widow spider.

He had opened his closet door and saw that it was clinging to the wall.

Seeing the spider in his closet and seeing how small it was, he understood many things about the spider immediately.

In Tal's life, he had been around black widows many times. He had a particular memory from elementary school. Ronald, shirtless in jean shorts, cigarette in mouth, sweating in the summer heat, had gone into the backyard to take a look at the cable box. His friend Arnie had told him that, depending on what type of setup he had, there was a pretty easy way to get free cable.

Ronald had worked out how to open the faded green cylinder, pulled the cover off, and discovered that a black widow was living there.

She was a big girl and she had three egg sacs.

Ronald was delighted. He put the green plastic cover back on.

The next day, Aunt Kendra had come to visit and Ronald wanted to show her the spider.

The two of them smoked cigarettes and looked at the creature.

Aunt Kendra said, "What a specimen."

Ronald said, "Right?"

Aunt Kendra filled up a jar with rubbing alcohol, took a plastic plate, scooped up the spider and her egg sacs onto the plate and, against the scurrying of the spider, managed to dump the whole exhibit into the jar and twist the lid closed.

The next day, Tal had taken this beautiful spider and her egg sacs to show-and-tell at school.

The spider in his closet, though, was struggling. Not thriving.

He looked at it again, closer. And then he laid down in bed.

He had a lot of emotions and there was no clear path forward. The spider, left alone, was going to die. And it was going to die a miserable death of starvation and struggle. He knew it had come from the garage, or maybe the attic, and that there was a reason it was no longer in those places; it had left there for some reason. And he knew that if he took it outside, it would not be any better than Tal giving it a quick and painless death.

There was no real solution. He did not know what to do, and he felt a little resentful that he had been put into this situation.

He thought, "Why should this be up to me?", he thought, "Can't I somehow leave this up to God's Will?"

And then he thought, "I guess it is God's Will that I should be placed in this situation, and to experience this. I guess it is God's Will that it's up to me in this case."

He still had no clue what to do, so he trapped the spider in a glass, put a coaster over the top, and placed it on his nightstand.

He sat in a half-lotus on his bed and concentrated on the spider.

He took a lot of breaths.

He recited in his head:

"*May you be safe and free and protected from harm."*

"May you be happy and contented."

"May you be healthy and whole."

"May you experience ease of well-being."

He saw sadness arising; loving-kindness was not the form equanimity was meant to take.

He sighed and, after a long time sitting, stood up, went to his closet and got a book.

The book had a Buddhist recitation for the dying that went like this:

This body is not me.

I am not limited by this body.

I am life without boundaries.

I have never been born, and I have never died.

Since before time, I have been free.

Birth and death are only doors through which we pass,

sacred thresholds on our journey.

Birth and death are a game of hide-and-seek.

We meet today. We will meet again tomorrow.

We meet at the source in every moment.

So laugh with me, say goodbye,

Say goodbye to meet again soon.

Tal read this and then took the spider in its glass out onto the back porch. He lifted the glass and smashed the spider with his shoe.

He had shot his aunt in the head.

He had heard the gunshot because he had been the one to fire the gun.

#

Killing Leila was very simple.

In fact, the hardest part was figuring out just where it was that Bailey and Nolan had lived. There were no current records online, for example voter registration was still at their previous residence, so he had to look through Bailey's social media to find clues. He knew the name of the town they lived in and there were a handful of pictures of the house online. It took two and a half hours of searching to find the house on Google Maps, while it only took two seconds to offer the dog the bacon salt and fentanyl.

Tal had sat with Leila for two minutes as she fell asleep and then it only took him about sixty seconds to find a place to stash a little baggy. Nolan, Tal had presumed, in his death, had not properly had a chance to secure his stash, which was behind a loose brick around the side of the house. Leila had found this and, in her sniffing, massively overdosed on the potent opiate.

#

Bailey sat in her car, Leila had not come to the fence.

And now she knew that she knew.

Nothing

"Tal", Bailed said on the phone, "Can you meet me somewhere?"

Tal thought.

He said, "Yes."

She said, "Tal."

In the silence, there was everything.

He said, "Okay."

#

Tal met Bailey at the park. She was sitting on one of the green park benches. She had on a hat, her hair was in a ponytail. She was wearing white Adidas with pink stripes.

Tal sat down across from her.

She said, "Hey."

He said, "Hey."

She said, "It's a beautiful day."

And Tal said, "It is a beautiful day."

Around them were families playing, having picnics. There were groups of young people playing Frisbee golf. There was a pair of women in their forties walking together. There was a church group having a cookout. The park was full of people and yet it was still mostly just blue and green; trees and grass and clovers and sky.

Tal said, "I used to come to this park and play this game, where what I would do is I would bring a baseball bat and a tennis ball. I would toss the tennis ball up in the air, swing, and hit it. And then I would walk to pick it up, and then I would hit it again. I would start over there," he pointed, "and then I would work my way in this direction, where we are."

He said, "And then I'd go over there," and he pointed across the road.

He said, "I don't know why I liked it so much, but it was something I had done since I was a kid. I had this old tee ball bat that I never used any more, and one day I went out with it and started hitting rocks. There were these soccer fields not far from my house, and I'd look for a good rock and toss 'em and hit 'em. The bat was old, so it didn't matter if it got dinged up. And the benefit of using rocks was that you don't have to fetch ‘em. But sometimes I couldn't find any more good rocks, so I'd hit the same one again and again."

Bailey said, "That's fun."

Tal laughed, "What was really fun was golf balls. But the thing with golf balls is, you hit them too far. It's a fine line to draw: on the one hand, you want the satisfaction of a real good swing, a real satisfying hit, and watching the thing fly. But on the other hand, you don't want to have to do too much walking in-between. You swing and hit a golf ball, and it ends up like a quarter mile away. Tennis balls, ultimately, that was the best."

Bailey felt warm inside.

"Do you want to go on a walk?" she asked.

"Sure," Tal said.

As they walked, Bailey asked, "Tal, do you love me?"

Tal said, "Yes."

Bailey said, "I love you too."

Bailey said, "Are you going to miss me?"

Tal smiled and he said, "Of course not."

Bailey laughed, "I know."

They walked into the woods along the path. Then Bailey led them far off the path, into a little clearing with tall grass. Bailey stopped. Tal stopped with her.

Bailey said, "Do you remember saying you would do anything for me?"

Tal said, "Yes."

"Did you mean it?" she asked.

Tal pulled out a capped syringe.

#

When Bailey's body was found in the clearing, the police found a folded up piece of paper in her jeans pocket.

The note was just a piece of paper.

Nothing was written on it.

THE END

Epilogue

Between the time Tal left the Ranch and started working at the psychiatric hospital, there were a few times when he felt the need to sit down and write.

This was one of those things he wrote, a month before he met Bailey:

Through the glass walls of the library, there was a small pond. There was a fountain in the middle of the pond. Things were green, the spring equinox had just passed.

There was music through ear buds and there was nostalgia: the music was old. It was music he had first heard more than ten years before when the emotional and conceptual qualities of life were at their most violent; the music was the music of The Revolution; of old comfortable ideas falling away and of terrifying glimmers of the unknown on the horizon. The music was the death of Who He Ought To Be and the far, far off signal of who, after some violent and disturbing years, he would one day become.

There was such a violent beauty there that it was hopeless to capture.

Then, too, there were clear thoughts of what this human, the one sitting at the library, would do next; there was an itinerary, a journey, perfectly refined. There was a certainty that this was the right path. He looked at his future and said the journey is to here: it is a righteous journey and even though it may turn out impossible to complete in practice (discarding besides the impossibility that any idea may ever become reality, since ideas will always remain ideas and reality will always remain reality, that never the two shall cross) its ultimate fate does not matter, it is the correct trajectory. If successful, it will pass like everything else; if unsuccessful, it will pass too, in its own spectacular way. There is no value in lingering on successful or unsuccessful qualities of the journey for such lingering preoccupies the grandeur and miracle of the current step:

There were geese that morning. Two geese in the parking lot of the vape store. They had walked right up to him. Unbelievable sharpness to the memory; yet still an infinite distance away. How present the geese had been two hours ago and how, now, in the library, the experience of the geese and the bus ride here, of the gas station cookie that you bought with food stamps; how, now, in the library, these near memories were exactly as far away as the homeless nights behind the Family Dollar; exactly as far away as the restaurant with the countless hours at boxes of chicken breasts; of dicing fifty tomatoes while listening to Shakira's new album; of the time Kate wore her braid to side and it felt like you were a teenager again; the trip to the lake in 1996, with the ski boat, the off-brand oatmeal cookies that dad had bought at the lake store. The geese of that morning were exactly as far away as Steph, exactly as far away as the party we had in the house that was being built, exactly as far away as the day you sat on the toilet and read the manual for World of Warcraft; the geese of that morning were exactly as far as anything else; they were all infinitely far away; they were all dead. The experience with the geese was dead, as dead now as mom and dad laying in the funeral home, with the bashed up part of dad's forehead covered in a strange way by the velvet cloth.

How in the world, he wondered in the present moment, at the library with his journal, will I ever think of anything to write? Truly, there is absolutely nothing to say. Look out the window, listen to the sounds, daydream about your ideal lover, it's all better than any dead memory.

There, that: what is there to say about the blue jay that just flew by?

And already, already - as soon as it is born, it is dead. This experience is just lifedeath, the eternal lifedeath. But if he is writing or if you are reading, well, there is also not anything better than that either, because it is the thing that is happening.

Written in dedication to Jenny C.